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Peace at sunset in Ananda Nagar

Calcutta Trilogy – book 3

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In memory of Joseph who stood present till the end to share what love had taught him in the hard way.

This third book brings to a close the journey of Joseph, a former Indian priest who has walked through crises, losses, and unexpected discoveries. The trilogy, which might be called *Diary of a Remarkable Day in India*, tells the story of a man striving to rediscover himself while the past continues to weigh upon him.

In the first episode, *The Nights of Balajinagar*, Joseph was still a zealous priest, yet already wrestling with doubt. In that night of turmoil he lost the faithful guidance of Joel, but found in Ananda a quieter, though incisive, presence, and in Lilian (Manju) an unforeseen muse.
In the second, *A New Dawn in Calcutta*, Joseph had left the priesthood and sought to rebuild his life with Manju. Yet she too slipped away, leaving him with memories and the distant voice of Ananda.
Now, in *Peace at Sunset in Ananda Nagar*, Joseph must reinvent himself. He is called to imagine a future, but remains trapped by shadows of the past and by a sense of impotence that paralyses him. Once more it is Ananda who opens a way forward, before yielding to a new guide, Thomas, who will accompany Joseph towards a different way of inhabiting life.

The thread running through the trilogy is Joseph's need to help those who suffer, to defend those who endure injustice. Yet this impulse is constantly challenged by doubt, by the temptation to flee, by the burden of guilt. Joseph does not

give in: love, stronger than death, holds him and drives him onwards. The key lies in the courage to speak, to be guided, to refuse isolation.

Joseph's inner journey is not his alone: it recalls our own passages through life, perhaps less dramatic, yet equally decisive.

Thanks to Joseph, to Manju, to Ananda, to Joel and to Thomas: they have shown us how to walk with concreteness, between fragility and hope, within the unfolding of life.

Part One: The Ruins

Chapter one.
The weight of Empty Rooms

The days that followed the inauguration dissolved one into another with the particular quality of all beginnings: too full of noise to be felt, too new to be trusted. The centre had a name now: it was painted in blue letters above the entrance, *Ananda Nagar Learning Centre,* and beneath it, smaller, the words *In memory of Manju,* and the name made everything both more real and more fragile, as though the act of naming a thing also declared how easily it might be lost.

Joseph threw himself into the work with the energy of a man who knows that motion is the surest

remedy against thought. There were forms to be filed, suppliers to be negotiated with, a schedule to be drawn up for the week's classes. The small office at the back of the centre became his refuge: a scarred wooden desk, two chairs, a shelf that was not yet full. He arrived early each morning, before the children, and walked through the empty classrooms touching the surfaces, the chalky blackboard, the edge of a bench, the window latch, as though checking that they were still solid, still real, still his.

The Sunday scholarship sessions had been the seed of everything. In the time before, when the centre existed seated in the streets, and like a dream spoken between two people in the evenings, those Sunday mornings had been their proof that the dream was not merely a dream. A dozen boys, then two dozen, crowding around an improvised blackboard in an open square, asking questions with a hunger that had nothing to do with the food they lacked. Joseph had watched Manju move among them with the natural authority of someone who knows without doubt why she is where she is. She would crouch beside a child struggling with a letter, or stand at the board drawing a diagram with quick sure lines, or simply rest a hand on a young shoulder in a gesture that said: *you are seen, you matter, you are enough.* Joseph had learned more about teaching

from watching her than from any of his years of formal study.

Now the Sunday sessions continued, and it was in them that he found his clearest reason to remain. The boys came faithfully, some of the original twelve, now older, returning with younger brothers or neighbours in tow, their faces alert with the particular pride of those who know they are part of something. Among them, always, was Rahim. He had been eight years old when he first wrote his name in Joseph's presence, holding the pencil with the concentration of someone defusing something precious. He was ten now, or perhaps eleven, Joseph was never entirely sure, and Rahim himself seemed indifferent to the question, and he had taken on, without being asked, the role of informal lieutenant: arriving first, helping arrange the benches, keeping an eye on the younger ones with the quiet authority of someone who has earned his place. It was Rahim who had appeared at Joseph's door in the days after Manju's death, accompanied by five friends, and said with the directness of a child who has not yet learned to soften difficult things: *Joseph, we must restart the school.* Joseph had not forgotten that. He did not think he ever would.

When the boys arrived and found him at the door, they greeted him with a directness that cut through the fog of his private grief.

“Sir, good morning. Sir, I have done the exercise. Sir, my mother says thank you.”

Their need was uncomplicated and therefore, in its way, merciful. For the two hours they were with him, Joseph was not a man in mourning. He was simply a teacher. The work was enough to fill the present tense completely.

It was the hours after that undid him.

He had not anticipated the quality of the silence that greeted him each evening when he returned to the small apartment above the street they had shared. He had believed, in the weeks immediately following Manju's death, when grief had been raw and insistent and almost physical, that time would bring a softening. What it brought instead was a different kind of difficulty, not the sharp pain of the early days but something more insidious, a slow seeping away of energy that left him sitting in his chair after dinner with no desire to read, to write, to pray, to do anything at all except endure the hours until he could justify sleeping.

The apartment held her still. Not in any dramatic or supernatural sense, Joseph was not given to the comfort of apparitions, but in the accumulated

residue of a shared life: a hook on the wall where she had hung her bag, a small shelf of books in an order only she had known the logic of, a chipped blue cup she had preferred for her morning tea which he continued to use without quite deciding to. He had not rearranged anything. He told himself it was not sentiment but practicality, there was no reason to move things, and no energy to do so. But on the evenings when the emptiness pressed most heavily, he knew it was something else. The room arranged as she had arranged it was the closest thing he had to her continued presence, and he was not yet ready to make the small irreversible concessions of reorganisation.

On the shelf opposite his chair, the urn stood on a square of white cloth. Joseph had placed it there on the day he returned alone from the ceremony, and had not moved it since. He was not sure what he believed about the ashes of the dead. His theological formation had never been particularly devoted to relics or physical objects of memory; the faith he had practised, when he had practised it, was more interior than ceremonial. But the urn was different. It was not a relic. It was a presence, or at least the trace of one. On the worst evenings, when the thought of simply leaving, of buying a ticket, boarding a train, going somewhere unnamed and

starting again as someone else, became a thought with real weight and temptation, he would find himself looking at the urn. Not praying. Not even, exactly, speaking. But looking, and in the looking, remembering not only her death but her life: the force of her conviction, the stubbornness of her hope, the way she had once said to him, on a difficult evening, when the difficulties of the Bhubaneswar years had seemed insurmountable: *Joseph, the only ones who do not fail are the ones who never begin.*

He had begun. She had helped him begin. To leave now would be to unmake what she had made possible.

He stayed.

But staying, he was discovering, required capacities he was not certain he possessed.

Manju had been, among many other things, the practical intelligence of everything they had built. It was she who had managed the complex web of small relations on which life in Ananda Nagar depended: the cordial word to the woman who controlled access to the water supply, the carefully timed visit to the official at the municipal office, the instinct for knowing which neighbour was quietly offended and needed to be drawn back into the circle before the offence hardened. Joseph had observed all of this

without fully understanding it, much as one can observe the workings of a clock without comprehending the mechanism. He had trusted her knowledge of the social grammar of the place, and she had never made him feel ignorant of it, which was itself a measure of her generosity.

Now he was the one who had to speak the grammar, and he found himself making errors he could not always identify. A conversation would end with a slightly strange atmosphere that he could not account for. A request would be met with an answer that was technically yes but carried a quality that felt like no. He learned slowly, and made notes in the evenings, and tried not to think too often about how quickly and naturally she would have navigated what cost him so much effort.

The teaching itself he could do. He had always been able to teach, it was perhaps the one vocation that had never been in question, through all the years of doubt about everything else. In front of the children he was himself, or near enough to himself that the difference did not matter. But administration, organisation, the management of people; these required an energy that was not always available to him, a reserve of social confidence that grief had thinned.

It was in this context, in the fifth week after the inauguration, that Priya came to his office to tell him she was leaving.

He had known it was coming, or ought to have known. There had been signs: a distraction in her manner, a hesitation in the mornings that had not been there at the beginning, a quality of absence even when she was present. Priya was the centre's first teacher, she had come recommended by a contact of Manju's father who had been careful, in establishing the foundation, to ensure the centre had people his daughter would have trusted, a quiet woman in her late twenties with genuine gifts for making mathematics comprehensible to children who had been told all their lives that numbers were not for them. She had been enthusiastic in the beginning, energised by the newness of the project, by the children's gratitude, by the sense of participating in something that mattered.

But Ananda Nagar was not an easy place to work, and what the centre could pay was not a salary that made the future feel secure, and there was another school, larger, established, on the better side of the city that had made her an offer.

She told him plainly, with the courtesy of someone who felt guilty but had already decided. She would

give two weeks' notice, she said. She hoped he would find someone. She was sorry.

Joseph listened. He could hear, as she spoke, the words that Manju would have said, not to retain her, necessarily, but to receive her. Manju would have acknowledged the difficulty of the choice without making Priya feel accused, would have found a way to celebrate what she had contributed while making clear what she would leave behind, might even have found some unexpected angle, a partial solution, a creative arrangement, a way of holding both things that would have transformed the conversation from a farewell into a negotiation. She had a gift for that: for finding, in situations that presented themselves as closed, a door that had not yet been tried.

Joseph found no door. He thanked Priya for her months of work. He said he understood. He wished her well. The words were true but they were insufficient, and he knew it, and the knowledge sat in him for the rest of the day like a stone.

That evening, sitting with his untouched cup of tea, he allowed himself the thought he usually refused. *She would have known what to say.* It was not a useful thought. It solved nothing and explained nothing that was not already obvious. But it was honest, and lately he had found a grim comfort in

honesty, even when honesty was simply the precise naming of loss.

He had been aware of Praveen's declining health for some months, in the peripheral way one is aware of things one cannot afford to address directly. Praveen was one of the constants of Ananda Nagar, one of those figures whose presence is so reliably woven into the texture of a place that it takes an absence to make the presence visible. He had pulled his rickshaw through these streets for many years with the tenacious cheerfulness of a man who had decided, at some point, that his circumstances were not going to determine his spirit. Joseph had known him since the early Calcutta times, and their friendship had the particular quality of friendships formed in difficulty: spare of gesture, rich in the unspoken.

The illness had come gradually, as such things do, and Praveen had treated it with the pragmatic stoicism of someone who cannot afford the luxury of being ill. But the body has its own mathematics, indifferent to will and necessity, and in recent weeks the equations had shifted. There were days when he could not pull the rickshaw at all. The doctor at the clinic, to which Joseph had quietly contributed the

registration fee, spoke of the kidneys, of rest, of changes that could not be delayed.

His wife, Sumitra, had now found work at a textile stall in the morning market. When Praveen's hospital visits required accompaniment, he grew dizzy on the crowded buses, was easily overwhelmed by the noise and bureaucracy of the clinic waiting rooms, she came with him, and her absences from the market were absences from the income on which the household balanced. The family had a plan, carefully assembled over years, for the wedding of their daughter Lavinia, now seventeen, a date they had fixed in their minds as a landmark of dignity and achievement. That plan was a savings account and a date and a faith that the pieces would fall together. The illness was disaggregating the pieces.

Joseph had visited twice and, on both occasions, had found the household arranged in the particular order of managed crisis: surfaces clean, voices calm, everything held in place by a visible effort that would not admit of pity but accepted, quietly, practical help. It was Sumitra who had spoken first about Lavinia, in the second visit, in a low voice that did not carry to the next room, where Lavinia herself was preparing tea. She had said it without sentimentality, as a statement of fact: the hospital fees were eating into the wedding savings. Lavinia

was keeping the house, caring for her father, doing what was needed without being asked. But she was seventeen. She had a young woman's mind. She needed something for herself.

What Sumitra did not say, but what Joseph understood from the shape of what she left unsaid, was that Lavinia's education had stopped years earlier, when she had reached the age at which a girl in their lane became a liability rather than a student. She had been good at her studies, Sumitra mentioned this once, briefly, as one mentions a door that was closed before it could be properly opened, and the hunger for learning had not left her, only been redirected inward, where it had no outlet. She helped her brothers when they came home with their schoolwork. She read whatever came to hand. But she had been a housemaid since she was twelve, and the years had a way of making provisional arrangements feel permanent.

Joseph had driven home thinking about Priya's empty desk.

He had not acted immediately, there was in him a habitual caution about decisions that affect others, a reluctance to offer what might prove to be only the form of help rather than its substance. But the following Sunday, when Lavinia appeared at the back of the classroom carrying a thermos of tea for

her father who had come to watch the children, Praveen's way, on his better days, of remaining connected to the life of the street, Joseph watched her without appearing to. She moved carefully through the crowded room, setting the thermos beside her father with a small whispered word, then remaining near the door with her arms crossed, watching the class with an attention that was more than polite. When one of the younger children near her knocked a pencil to the floor, she bent and returned it before the child had noticed it was gone. It was a small gesture. But small gestures, Joseph had come to believe, were the only reliable evidence of character.

He spoke to Praveen afterwards, when the children had dispersed and the room was quiet. Praveen listened with the still, serious expression of a man for whom the acceptance of help has required the dismantling of pride, and who has done that work and arrived on the other side of it. He said he would speak to Lavinia. He said he thought she would accept.

She came to the centre on a Wednesday morning, neatly dressed in a blue kameez, carrying a small notebook as though she had already decided to take notes. She was seventeen but carried herself with the self-possession of someone who had been required

to grow up quickly and had done so without resentment. She asked clear questions. When he showed her the classroom she looked at it the way one looks at a problem one already has ideas about, taking in the layout, the materials, the light from the single window, the arrangement of the benches.

"Have you taught before?" he asked.

"I helped my brothers with their studies," she said. "*And sometimes the younger children in our lane."*

She paused. "*I like explaining things. I always wished someone had explained more things to me."*

The last sentence came out quietly, without self-pity, almost as an afterthought. But Joseph heard in it the whole history that Sumitra had left unspoken: the interrupted schooling, the redirected hunger, the years of making do with whatever learning could be gathered at the margins of a life organised around survival. He noted it without comment. Some things are better received in silence.

He noted also something that he could not yet have named and would not for some time allow himself to consciously articulate: that she had a quality of direct presence, an unselfconscious attentiveness to whatever was immediately before her, that reminded him quietly, painfully, distantly, of someone he had loved. He set the observation aside. It was too early, and it was not, in any case, useful. What was useful

was that the centre had lost one teacher and gained, perhaps, another. What was useful was that a family's difficulty might be met by a purpose.

He told her she could begin the following Monday. She thanked him without excessive gratitude, simply, as though it were a reasonable arrangement between people treating each other with respect.

Walking home that evening through the lanes of Ananda Nagar, Joseph passed the spot where the cholera had moved fastest through the neighbourhood in the terrible months before, a low area near the drain, where the water had stood longest. The municipality had done some work since then, and the drain was covered now, and there were no visible signs of what had happened there. The city absorbed its catastrophes quickly, overlaying them with new surfaces. Only the people carried the weight of what the surfaces concealed.

He looked up at the sky, as had become his custom. Two stars, familiar by now, close together above the eastern roofline. He did not speak to them. He simply noted them, as a navigator notes landmarks, not as objects of devotion but as confirmation of position. He was here. He was still going forward. The flame, as he had promised her, was still burning.

It was small and it was uncertain and there were evenings when he could barely feel its warmth. But it had not gone out.
That, for now, was enough.

Chapter Two
What the Living Owe

The anniversary came on a Thursday.

Joseph had known it was approaching in the way one knows about certain appointments: not with anticipation exactly, but with a low, persistent awareness, a pressure at the edge of consciousness that he had been carrying since those first terrible weeks, since the day the outbreak ended and the counting of the dead began, and the neighbourhood had emerged, blinking, into the ordinary light of a city that had continued without them. He had marked nothing in his calendar. He did not need to. The body keeps its own records, and his had been keeping this one since the morning he had stood in the lane and understood that the cholera was over and Manju was not coming back.

The ceremony had been organised not by him but by the neighbourhood itself, which surprised him and then, on reflection, did not. Ananda Nagar had its own memory, its own ways of marking what it had endured. It was Leena who had come to him three weeks before, accompanied by two women from the lane nearest the old drain, to tell him that people

wanted to gather, to light candles, to name the dead. There had been almost fifty deaths in the outbreak. seven of them had been children from the Sunday school. People wanted to say their names aloud, she said. They wanted someone to receive the names.

He had agreed to speak. He had agreed in the way one agrees to things that seem, in the moment of agreeing, both obviously right and entirely impossible.

In the days before the ceremony, he tried several times to prepare what he would say. He sat at the scarred desk in the back office of the centre and wrote sentences and crossed them out. The sentences that came most easily were the ones he trusted least: the consoling formulas, the assurances about meaning and purpose, the careful architecture of hope that he had once been trained to construct over the rawness of grief. He had spoken such sentences many times, in another life, at bedsides and gravesides and in the dim interiors of churches where people came carrying what they could not carry alone. He had believed them then, or believed in the importance of believing them. Now they felt like borrowed clothes, fitting in outline but wrong in every particular.

What he believed, sitting alone in the office at night with the city's sounds filtering through the single

window, was harder to arrange into sentences. He believed that fifty people had died of a preventable disease in a neighbourhood that the city had decided, long before the cholera came, was expendable. He believed that Manju had gone into that neighbourhood when others had not, and had contracted the illness in the service of people who had no one else, and had died of it, and that the word martyrdom was one he could use without feeling he was stealing something. He believed that hope was not the same as consolation and that the difference mattered enormously, though he could not always say how. He believed that the children who had died deserved more than candles and names spoken once into the night air of a lane that the municipality had still not properly drained.

These were not things he could say. Or perhaps they were exactly the things he needed to say. He could not tell, and the uncertainty kept him awake.

The morning of the ceremony was clear, which seemed both appropriate and slightly unkind. A grey sky would have been easier to match. Joseph dressed without particular attention, drank his tea standing at the window, looked at the urn on its shelf of white cloth.

He had developed, over the past weeks, a habit of

speaking to her in the mornings. Not prayer, not quite, though the line between the two had become less distinct than his theological training would have predicted. It was more like the continuation of a conversation that had not been finished, a refusal to accept that the silence was final. He told her small things: what the weather was doing, what he intended to do that day, what was worrying him. He told her when he had made a mistake in the management of the centre, which was often enough to keep the conversation varied. He told her when one of the children had done something that made him feel, briefly and completely, that the work was worth exactly what it cost.

This morning he said:

I don't know what to say to them tonight. I don't know how to do this without you.

He waited, as he always did, for the particular quality of silence that followed. It was not a speaking silence, not a silence freighted with message. It was simply the silence of an empty room, and he had learned to receive it as honestly as everything else.

You always knew", he said. "*You could walk into any room and find the true thing to say. I watched you do it a hundred times. I never understood how.*

He finished his tea and went to work.

The children arrived that morning with the awareness of the day already on them, absorbed from their families and the conversations of the lane. They were quieter than usual, or quiet in a different register, not the subdued quiet of boredom or distraction, but something more attentive. They had lived through the outbreak. The younger ones had been too small to understand it fully at the time, but they had grown up inside the understanding that their neighbourhood had been sealed, that people had died, that certain families were now different in their composition from how they had been before.

Rahim came early, as always, and helped arrange the benches without being asked. The weeks since the outbreak had done something to his face, sharpened it slightly, as though what he had witnessed was asserting itself in the bones. He had the manner, increasingly, of someone who was thinking about more things than he was saying.

When the room was ready and there were still a few minutes before the other children arrived, he stood near Joseph's desk and said, without preamble:

"*My mother lit a candle this morning. For Diya.*"

Diya had been nine years old. She always liked to come to the Sunday school and had a gift for numbers that Joseph had been quietly excited about, in the way one is excited about a gift that has

not yet been told it is a gift.

"I know", Joseph said.

"She says Diya would have been ten now." Rahim was looking at the floor. "*She says she thinks about what she would have been like at ten."*

Joseph said nothing for a moment. Then:

"*What do you think she would have been like?"*

Rahim considered this with his usual seriousness. "*Louder,"* he said. "*She was getting louder. I think she would have been very loud by now."*

Joseph felt something move in his chest that was not quite a smile and not quite pain but occupied the same space as both.

"*I think so too",* he replied.

Two other boys arrived then, Suresh and Motiur, both of the original Sunday group, both now regular students at the centre. Motiur had lost a cousin in the outbreak, a fact he carried with the careful self-containment of a boy who had decided that sorrow was a private matter. He greeted Joseph with the slight formal nod that had become his customary way of marking significant occasions, and took his place at the bench, and opened his notebook to a clean page, as though the act of readiness were itself a form of tribute.

Suresh, who processed most things through the mechanism of speech, sat beside him and said:

"*Joseph-sir, are you going to cry tonight? My father cried last year at the Durga ceremony and everyone pretended not to notice."*
"Suresh …", said Motiur, without looking up from his notebook.
"What? It's a real question."
Joseph looked at Suresh, who was ten and had the face of someone who expected the world to answer him directly because he had always answered it directly in return.
"*I don't know",* he said. "*I think it's possible".*
Suresh nodded, apparently satisfied.
"*That's all right,* he said. *My father says crying is just what happens when you've been holding something for too long."*

The Methodist pastor, Reverend Das, came to the centre in the late afternoon to go over the order of the evening with Joseph. He was a compact, careful man in his sixties, with the patient authority of someone who has presided over many difficult occasions and understands that the ceremony is a vessel, not its own contents. He and Joseph had developed, over the past weeks, a working relationship built on mutual respect and a shared understanding that neither of them would press the other on certain questions.

He brought with him two members of the church council: a woman named Mrs. Ghosh, who had organised much of the practical work of the evening: the candles, the list of names, the small printed programme; and a younger man, Thomas, who played harmonium and had agreed to lead a hymn.

They sat together in the office, the door open to the empty classroom, and went through the plan. The gathering would be outside, near the old drain, at seven o'clock. Mrs. Ghosh would read the names. Thomas would play. The Imam from the local mosque had agreed to offer a prayer, Joseph had arranged this himself, three weeks earlier, understanding that the ceremony needed to belong to the whole neighbourhood, not only to its Christian institutions.

"And you will speak", said Reverend Das. It was not quite a question.

"I will try", Joseph said.

The pastor looked at him steadily. He had a way of looking at people that was neither intrusive nor distant, simply present, in the manner of someone who has learned that presence is the most one can reliably offer.

"You do not need to comfort them," he said. "*They are not expecting comfort from you. They are expecting honesty. They know who you are. They know what*

these months have cost you."
Joseph looked at him.
"*That is either very reassuring or very alarming."*
"Both, I think," said the pastor, and for a moment his face opened into something that was almost a smile.
"*Both is usually right".*
Mrs. Ghosh, who had been reviewing her list of names, looked up briefly.
"*She would have known what to do this evening,"* she said, with the directness of a woman who believes that unspoken things accumulate and cause damage.
"*Manju. She would have had the right words. But that is not a reason for you to be silent. It is a reason for you to speak with what you actually have."*
Joseph did not answer immediately. He looked at the list in her hands, fifty names, written in a neat, deliberate hand.
"*Thank you",* he said, finally. It was not clear which of them he was thanking.

Manju's father arrived an hour before the ceremony. Joseph saw him from the window of the office: a tall man, slightly stooped now in a way he had not been stooped at the inauguration, making his way along the lane with the careful attention of someone navigating ground that holds more weight than its

surface suggests. He had come from Bhubaneswar on the morning train. He had not told Joseph he was coming, which meant either that it had been a last-minute decision or that he had not trusted himself to announce it in advance and then be held to it.

Joseph went to meet him at the door.

They embraced without speaking, the embrace of men who have passed through something together that does not require discussion. Then Manju's father stepped back and looked at the entrance of the centre, at the blue letters, at the smaller words beneath.

In memory of Manju, he read aloud, as though he had not seen them before, though Joseph knew he had, at the inauguration. Perhaps it was simply one of those things that needed to be read more than once before it became true.

"Come inside", Joseph said. "*I will make tea".*

They sat in the office, and the conversation moved through the surface things first: the journey, the heat, the state of the centre, the number of children currently enrolled, in the way that conversations do when both parties are approaching something they have agreed without discussion to approach carefully.

It was Manju's father who moved them off the surface. He set down his cup and said, without

looking at Joseph directly:
"*How are you, really".*
It was not phrased as a question.
Joseph looked at his hands around his own cup.
"*I manage",* he said. "*Some days better than others. The work helps. The children help".* He paused. "*The evenings are hard".*
The older man nodded. He was silent for a moment, and in the silence Joseph could hear the sounds of the lane outside, children's voices, a vendor calling, the particular urban music of a neighbourhood preparing for evening.
"When she left with you", Manju's father said at last, "*I was angry. You know this. I was angry at you for a long time, and I was angry at her for choosing you. I thought she was throwing away everything we had tried to give her. I thought you had taken something from us".*
He said this without accusation, as a plain account of what had been true.
"I know", Joseph said.
"I was wrong!". He said this also plainly, in the tone of a man who has done the work of arriving at a conclusion and is now reporting it. "*Not about everything, I still think you were both reckless, I still think there were other ways, but I was wrong about the essential thing. I did not understand what she*

was doing. I thought it was rebellion. It was not rebellion. It was her". He gestured slightly, not toward anything specific, but toward the centre, the lane, the whole Calcutta that surrounded them. "*This was her. This is what she was made to do".*

Joseph felt the familiar tightening in his chest that preceded tears, and made the familiar effort to receive it without either suppressing it entirely or surrendering to it.

"*Yes",* he said. "*It was".*

"And you helped her do it. You came here together. You built this together." The older man looked at him now, directly. "*She is gone, Joseph. But what she built is not gone. What you built. And that is not finished".* He paused. "*You understand what I am saying".*

"I think so".

"I am saying", he continued, with the deliberate patience of someone who has decided that clarity matters more than delicacy, "*that you are still here. That those children are still here. That the question of what Manju's life meant is not answered yet, it is answered every morning when you open that door".* He indicated the classroom with a slight movement of his head. "*She is not absent from this place. She is present in everything that happens here. Every child who learns to read, every family that finds some help,*

every morning that this centre opens its doors, that is Manju. That is her life continuing".

Joseph said nothing. The tightening in his chest had become something he was no longer managing.

I lost her too, the older man said, more quietly now. "*You are not the only one who lost her. And I tell you, because I know what loss does to a man; I have carried mine since the day she left, the loss of her and the regret for the years I wasted being angry and not understanding. I tell you that the worst thing we can do is let the grief make us smaller than she believed we were".*

He stopped. Outside, someone was calling to someone across the lane. An ordinary evening sound, carrying through an extraordinary moment.

"She chose you", Manju's father said. "*She left everything she had known to be with you. She did not do that because you were convenient or because she had no other option. She did it because she believed you were capable of something.* He looked at Joseph steadily. *She was right. I have seen what you have built here. I have seen the faces of those children. She was right about you. Do not prove her wrong now by disappearing into your grief".*

The silence between them lasted a long moment. Joseph found that he could not speak immediately, not because there was nothing to say but because

the words required a steadiness he needed a moment to assemble.
"She used to say …", he began, and stopped. Started again. "*She used to say that the only ones who do not fail are the ones who never begin. I think of that often. She was right about that too",* said her father, and there was something in his voice that was almost a smile, the particular smile of a parent encountering the wisdom of a child they did not know had wisdom.
"I owe it to her", Joseph said.
"Yes. But not only to her". The older man gestured again toward the classroom, toward the lane, toward the gathering evening. "*To yourself. To those children. You did the most difficult thing a man can do; you left behind a life you had built, a vocation, a community, everything you knew. You did it for love of her, yes. But that love did not end with her life. It became this".* He spread his hands slightly, a quiet gesture, but encompassing. "*Let it continue to be this".*

At seven o'clock, the lane filled.
They came from the immediate neighbourhood and from further away, families Joseph recognised and faces he had never seen. The Imam stood near the drain with a quiet dignity. Reverend Das stood beside him. Thomas had set up his harmonium on a folding table and was adjusting his position with the careful

concentration of a musician for whom the instrument is a form of prayer.

Mrs. Ghosh read the names.

She read them clearly, one by one, with a pause after each that was neither too long nor too short, a pause exactly calibrated to allow the name to be received before the next one came. Fifty names. When she read the name of each child, Joseph heard, somewhere in the gathered crowd, the sound of a parent or a sibling breathing differently.

Then it was his turn.

He stood before them in the candlelight, dozens of candles, held in cupped hands against the slight evening breeze, and looked at their faces, and understood what Reverend Das had meant. They were not waiting for comfort. They were waiting for truth, for the acknowledgment that what they had survived was real and that someone who had also survived it and also lost from it was willing to stand with them in the reality of it, without the protective coating of consolation.

He stood for a moment in silence. Then he spoke.

"I have been trying for three weeks, he said, *to find the right words for tonight. I have not found them. I think perhaps they do not exist, or perhaps they exist in a language none of us speak yet, the language of what it means to lose a child, to lose a neighbour, to*

lose a woman who went into your homes when everyone else was staying out, and to know that she is not here tonight".

He stopped. Around him the candles moved in the light air.

"I want to say that it was not supposed to happen. That the illness did not have to take fifty lives, that it would not have taken them if this neighbourhood had clean water and adequate drainage and a health infrastructure that considered its people worth protecting. I want to say that because it is true, and because I think we do the dead a disservice when we speak only of what their deaths meant and not of what caused them. They did not die of fate. They died of neglect, and the distinction matters."

The silence of the gathered crowd had a particular texture. Not hostile, not comfortable. Attentive.

"But I also want to say this", he continued. *"I have spent these months in this neighbourhood asking myself what it means to continue. To open the centre every morning. To sit beside a child who cannot yet read and wait for the moment when the letter and the sound come together and something changes in their face. To do all of this knowing that she is not here, and that the doing of it is, in some way I am still learning to understand, the best answer I have to her absence".*

He paused. Somewhere in the crowd he saw, without looking for him, Manju's father. The older man's face was still.

"She taught me", Joseph said, "*that the only ones who do not fail are the ones who never begin. She said it in a different context, in a different city, in a different year. But I think it is what she would say tonight, to all of us. She would say: you are still here. Begin again. Begin as many times as you need to. The beginning is not a defeat. The beginning is the whole point".*

He stopped. The words had arrived at their natural end, and he knew, from years of speaking to people in the formal settings of faith, from something older and less formal than that, when a thing was complete.

The silence lasted longer than he had expected.

Then Thomas began to play.

It was a simple melody, in the mode of a hymn but without the weight of institution, something that could belong to anyone willing to receive it. And the crowd, slowly, settled into it, not singing, most of them, just breathing with it, which was perhaps the same thing.

Joseph stood and held his candle and let the night do what the night does.

Later, after the crowd had thinned and the candles had burned to their ends and Reverend Das had shaken his hand in a way that communicated more than either of them needed to say, Joseph walked with Manju's father back toward the centre.

They did not speak much. The significant things had been said, and both of them knew it. At the door of the centre, the older man stopped and looked again at the letters above the entrance.

"She would have been embarrassed by the sign", he said.

Joseph considered this. "*Yes",* he said. "*She would have said it was too much fuss".*

"And then she would have been secretly pleased.

"Yes", Joseph said. "*That too".*

Manju's father put a hand briefly on Joseph's shoulder, a brief, firm pressure, and then released it.

"*I shall come again",* he said. "*More often. There is much I should have done sooner. I intend to make up the time".*

"It is more than acceptable", Joseph said.

He watched the older man make his way along the darkened lane toward the guesthouse where he was staying, and then turned and looked up at the sky.

Two stars, close together, above the eastern roofline.

I said something true tonight, he said, quietly, to no one in particular and to one person in particular. *I*

am not sure they knew how to receive it. But I think it was what was needed. I think it was what you would have wanted.

The stars did not answer. They had never answered. But they were there, as they had been there every clear night since the outbreak ended, steady above the roofline of Ananda Nagar, and their steadiness was its own kind of answer, and he had learned, slowly, to accept it as enough.

He went inside.

The flame was still burning.

Chapter Three
What Remains

The letter came on a Tuesday in January, in an envelope of good quality paper with a return address in Bangalore that Joseph recognised before he had fully read it. He set it on the desk without opening it and taught the morning class and ate his lunch and spoke with Lavinia about the arithmetic exercises for the following week, and it was only in the late afternoon, when the centre had emptied and the sounds of the lane had settled into their evening register, that he sat down and opened it.

The handwriting was precise and deliberate, the handwriting of a man who considers each word before committing it to the page. Father Cornelius had been provincial superior for eleven years, and Joseph had known him since his own early years in formation: a serious man, not unkind, possessed of the particular patience of someone who believes that the correct approach, applied with sufficient gentleness and persistence, will eventually find its

opening. He had aged in the years since Joseph had last seen him. The photograph on the provincial house newsletter that occasionally found its way to Joseph, he was not sure how, and had never asked, showed a face more lined than he remembered, but with the same quality of composed attention.

He read the letter twice.

It was carefully written, which was to say it was written with care for Joseph and also with care for itself, the care of a document that knows it may be declined and wishes to survive the declination with its dignity intact. Father Cornelius began with condolences, genuine ones, Joseph thought, not merely formal. He had heard of Manju's death with sadness, he wrote, and had thought often of Joseph in the months since. He mentioned Agostino, briefly, without pressing the point, he had spoken with him after the visit to Calcutta, and Agostino had described the inauguration of the centre, and the work Joseph was doing, with an admiration that Joseph would perhaps have found surprising. Father Cornelius wrote that he had not been surprised. He had always known, he said, that Joseph's gifts were not confined to the formal structures of religious life.

Then, in the third page, the careful turn.

He was not, he wrote, writing to make demands or to reopen old wounds. He understood that Joseph had

made choices that were his own, and that those choices had grown from something genuine and had led to something real. He would not presume to judge them. But he wished Joseph to know, and here the handwriting seemed, to Joseph's eye, to slow slightly, as though the writer were choosing each word from a larger collection, that the congregation had not closed its heart to him. That there were ways, he suggested, of maintaining connection that did not require the erasure of what the past years had been. He did not specify what these ways were, which was itself a form of tact: the offer without the contract, the open hand without the grip.

He closed by saying that he prayed for Joseph and for the children of the centre. He signed himself, simply, Cornelius, without the title, which was perhaps the most careful gesture in a letter full of careful gestures.

Joseph sat for a while with the letter in his hands.

He was aware of what it was, and he was aware of what it was not. It was not Agostino's directness, *return to us, you are a priest forever*, translated into ink and good paper. Or rather, it was that same invitation, but dressed in a patience and a delicacy that made it harder to refuse cleanly. Agostino's offer had been easy to answer because it had been so completely without nuance. This was different. This

was an outstretched hand, and the hand was genuine, and the man who extended it had meant well for Joseph in the years when Joseph had needed people to mean well for him, and the letter deserved more than dismissal.

But he could not take the hand. Not yet, and perhaps not ever, and he did not know which of those two things was true, and the uncertainty was itself a kind of answer.

He thought of what he would have said to Manju, if she had been there. She would have read it, he knew, she had always read his correspondence with a clear eye, offering observations without volunteering opinions, which was a form of respect he had not always found easy to receive and had come to understand only gradually as a gift. She would have set the letter down and looked at him and said something that cut directly to what he was feeling without naming it, because she had never needed to name a thing to illuminate it.

He said it to the room instead, or to the small clay urn on its shelf of white cloth, the physical fact of her absence made into an object he could tend, which had become the same thing.

It is a kind letter, he said. *He is a good man. But I am not what he is hoping I am. I am not what I was. I am something else now, and I do not yet know its name,*

but it is mine, and it is here.

He folded the letter carefully and placed it in the drawer of the desk, beneath a folder of the children's exercise papers. He did not throw it away. That too was a kind of answer, though he could not have said with precision what it answered.

Lavinia had been at the centre for three weeks when Joseph began to notice the pattern.

It was not any single thing. It was an accumulation of small observations, the kind that arrive at the edge of one's attention rather than the centre, and that one initially dismisses as coincidence or projection, and that gradually refuse to be dismissed.

She arrived each morning slightly before her appointed time, not in the eager, anxious way of someone trying to make an impression, but with the calm punctuality of someone for whom arriving prepared is simply what one does. She kept a notebook, the same one she had brought to the interview, in which she wrote not only lesson plans but observations: this child understands better when the problem is made physical, given something to hold; that child is distracted before lunch and should be given something to focus her hands during that hour. The notebook was dense with small, precise notations that revealed an attention Joseph

found striking in someone who had never been formally trained to teach.

She had, also, an instinct for the moment when a child was struggling in a way that was not about the material. She would notice, without appearing to notice, the slight change in posture that preceded a child's withdrawal, the inward turning, the eyes that stopped engaging, and she would find a reason to pass by, to ask a question that had nothing to do with the lesson, to create a small, temporary shelter in which the child could collect itself before returning. She did this quietly, without calling attention to it.

Joseph stopped himself the third time he reached for the comparison that kept arriving at the edge of his mind.

He was aware of what he was doing. He had caught himself doing it more than once in the preceding days, and each time he had stopped the comparison at its threshold, as though crossing it would be a form of transgression he had not yet identified clearly enough to name. It was something to do with fairness to Lavinia, who deserved to be seen as herself, not as an echo of someone else, and something to do with pain, because each time the comparison arrived it brought with it the full weight of the absence it was measuring against, and

something else, less clearly defined, that felt closer to fear.

The fear was this: that if he allowed himself to see Manju in Lavinia, even partially, even as a quality of attention or a way of moving through a classroom, he would begin to need that presence, and needing it would be a kind of betrayal, and the betrayal would be not of Manju but of what Manju actually was, herself, irreducible, not a quality to be found elsewhere or a role to be filled by the next person who arrived at his door.

He understood all of this. And yet he was also aware that the understanding was beginning to cost him something practical, something that the centre needed and the children needed, which was his full presence when he was in the same room as Lavinia. He was holding himself slightly back. He was receiving her reports with a formality that she had noticed, he could see it in the small, careful adjustment she made to her manner when she spoke with him, the professional precision that covered a wariness he had not intended to create.

It was Rahim who, without knowing he was doing so, moved something in Joseph's thinking.

It was a Friday afternoon in late January, the classroom nearly empty, the last of the children

having dispersed into the lane. Lavinia was tidying the benches at the far end of the room, and Rahim was helping her, he often stayed late, finding reasons to be useful, which was his way of being present in a place he had come to regard as partly his own. Joseph was in the doorway between the classroom and the office, a folder in his hands, watching without meaning to watch.

Rahim had found, under one of the benches, a small drawing on a torn scrap of paper. It was the kind of drawing children produce without planning, a house, a tree, a figure with arms extended. He looked at it for a moment, then held it up toward Lavinia.

"Someone left this", he said.

Lavinia took it, looked at it, and then did something Joseph did not expect: she turned it slightly, as though looking for something in it, and then said, to Rahim, with complete seriousness:

"*Do you know whose it is?"*

"Probably Anand's", said Rahim. "*He draws when he's supposed to be writing".*

"Does he?" She looked at the drawing again. "*He draws well".* She set it carefully on the bench rather than discarding it. "*Let's make sure he gets it back".*

It was, again, a small thing. The drawing returned to its maker rather than lost to the floor. A child's work treated as though it mattered. It was such a small

thing that Joseph almost did not register it consciously, and then registered it completely, and felt it land somewhere in him with a precision that surprised him.

He remembered, and the memory arrived without warning, as the most important ones do, a morning in the time before Calcutta, in the loss that had broken everything open and changed the direction of both their lives. He remembered the time spent together in the school in Balajinagar, in those difficult months when they were finding their way toward each other through every obstacle the world and their own histories had arranged against them. He had seen her do something similar: retrieve a child's drawing from the floor, hold it up to the light, find the child and return it. He had watched her do it and had thought: *she sees them. She sees each of them as though they are the only one.*

He had loved her for that, among the thousand other things. He had loved her for the quality of her attention, for the way it made the recipient of it feel momentarily singular and sufficient. It was a quality that could not be manufactured or learned from a manual. It came from somewhere prior to technique, from the conviction, held at some level below argument, that the person before you was worth seeing completely.

Lavinia had it.

Not as Manju had had it, because Manju had had it in her particular way, with her particular history and her particular stubbornness and her particular laugh that arrived without warning and transformed the atmosphere of a room, but as her own version of the same essential thing. Her own expression of the same capacity.

Joseph stood in the doorway and allowed himself, for the first time without immediately retreating, to complete the thought.

She was not Manju. She would never be Manju, and nothing in Joseph would have wanted her to be. Manju was not replaceable, not in the centre, not in his life, not in the part of his heart that still spoke to a clay urn on a shelf of white cloth every morning before the day began. But the gift that Manju had brought to the children, the gift of being fully seen, was not Manju's alone to give. And a centre that had been built to honour that gift, to extend it outward into the lives of children who had been seen by no one, could not function as the private monument of one man's grief. It had to be, as Manju had always intended it to be, alive.

He was keeping it alive by holding himself back from the one person currently most capable of helping him do so.

He went back to his desk and sat down and looked at the drawer where the letter from Father Cornelius rested beneath the exercise papers. Then he thought of the urn. Then he looked at the ceiling, which told him nothing useful, as ceilings generally do.
I understand, he said quietly. *I am trying.*

The following Monday he asked Lavinia to stay after the other children had left, and they sat together in the classroom in the thin February light and he spread her notebooks open on the bench between them and said, without preamble:
"*Tell me what you see in this class. Not what the schedule says. What you actually see".*
She looked at him for a moment with the slight wariness that she had developed in the past weeks, the careful readiness of someone who is not yet sure whether the conversation will be professional or personal, closed or open, and then something in his manner, perhaps the absence of the usual formality, reached her, and she set the wariness down.
She talked for nearly an hour.
She talked about the children individually, each one, in the particular idiom of someone who has been watching closely: not clinical assessments but portraits, each with its specific detail and its specific difficulty and its specific, observed capacity for

growth. She talked about the way the classroom energy changed depending on the time of day, and what she had been trying in response, and what had worked and what had not and why she thought the distinction mattered. She talked about Rahim's intelligence and his habit of hiding it when he thought it might separate him from the other boys, and about the youngest child in the class, a five-year-old named Priti who had arrived two weeks ago and sat in the first row and watched everything with enormous dark eyes and had not yet spoken a word but who communicated, Lavinia said, with a precision and completeness that most people manage only with language.

Joseph listened and made notes and asked questions, and gradually, in the rhythm of a real conversation between two people who are both actually present in it, the formality dissolved.

At one point she said, looking at her notebook:

"*I think Priti has been frightened of something. Not here, she doesn't seem frightened here. Something before*". She paused. "*I think she came here to be safe*".

Joseph looked at the notes he had been given when Priti's grandmother had brought her in, sparse, not fully explained, the kind of notes that say less than they know. He thought about what safety meant in

the lanes of Ananda Nagar, what the life behind those enormous dark eyes might have contained.

And then, arriving without permission as the most necessary thoughts always did, he thought of another child.

The child that Manju had carried through the impossible months in Bhubaneswar, conceived in love and in secrecy and in the midst of a situation that had no clean resolution, the child whose loss had been wound beneath all the other wounds, the one whose absence had broken something open in both of them and set the final direction of everything. He had not allowed himself to think about that child clearly, directly, for a very long time. The grief of it had been folded inside the larger grief of Manju's death, and he had not yet had the steadiness to unfold it carefully and hold it in the light and acknowledge it for what it was: his child too, lost before he had even known fully what he was losing.

He had wanted to be a father. He had not said this clearly, even to himself, in the years since. He had said other things, that the choice had been about Manju, about love, about conscience, about the recognition that the life he had been living was no longer the life he was actually capable of living honestly, and all of those things were true. But underneath them, quieter and more vulnerable than

the rest, was this: he had wanted to be a father, and the child had not survived, and Manju had not survived, and he was sitting in a classroom in Ananda Nagar in the thin light of a February afternoon with children who had been seen by no one, and a young woman who saw each of them completely, and something in the configuration of this moment felt like the shape of an answer to a question he had never been able to ask directly.

He did not say any of this to Lavinia. There are things that are thought and things that are said, and the line between them is one of the most important lines a person learns to hold.

But he looked at his notes about Priti and said:

"*I think you're right. I think she came here to be safe. Let's make sure she is".*

Lavinia looked at him, and for a moment her own careful composure softened slightly, as though something she had been waiting for had finally arrived.

Yes, she said. Simply, and with certainty. *Let's.*

That evening, walking home through the lane, Joseph stopped at the place where the drain had been covered and looked up.

Two stars, close together, in the narrow strip of sky between the rooftops.

The January cold, such as it was in Calcutta, a gentling rather than a bite, the air thin and clear in a way the monsoon months never permitted, had settled into the lane, and the cooking fires were going in the houses on either side, and the smell of *dal* and woodsmoke moved through the early dark.

She is not replaceable, he said. *I want you to know that I know that. But I think I have been so afraid of that truth that I have been living smaller than you would have wanted. Smaller than those children need.*

The evening air moved slightly.

There is a girl, he said. *She sees them. The way you saw them.* He paused. *I am going to let her help me. I think that is what is needed. I think that is what you would say.*

He stood a while longer in the thin cold. Down the lane, someone called a child's name, twice, three times, the ordinary summons of an ordinary evening. A dog investigated something near the drain and moved on, satisfied or disappointed, impossible to tell which.

Then he continued home.

The letter from Father Cornelius was in the drawer. The urn was on its shelf. The flame in the small lamp beside it, he had begun lighting it each evening without quite deciding to, the habit arriving before

the intention, was still burning, and he tended it, as he had promised, and the night passed, and in the morning the cold lifted slightly, and the centre opened its doors, and the children came.

Part Two: The Fire

Chapter Four
The Weight of Paper

The letter arrived on a Tuesday, which Joseph would later think was appropriate. Tuesdays had always been ordinary days, days without liturgical weight, days when nothing was supposed to happen.

It came on government stationery, pale blue, the seal of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation embossed at the top like a bruise. The language was administrative, almost gentle in its bureaucratic remove — *resumption of development proceedings, previously suspended due to public health emergency, notification of affected residents, relocation assistance to be provided in accordance with Schedule VII* — but its meaning was simple enough. Rajan Mitra's commercial centre was alive again. And Ananda Nagar had sixty days.

Joseph read it standing at the door of the community centre, Sister Alphonsa beside him. She had brought it from the post office herself, sensing already what it contained. Around them, the morning was proceeding as mornings do: a woman hanging washing between two poles, children chasing a dog that did not want to be caught, two old men sharing a bidi on an upturned crate. All of it ordinary. All of it, he thought, sixty days from erasure.

"She would have known what to do," Sister Alphonsa said. Not cruelly. Simply.

"*Yes*," Joseph said. "*She would have*."

He folded the letter and put it in his shirt pocket, against his chest. He could feel it there for the rest of the day, stiff and warm, like a thing with a pulse.

He began to write a journal that evening at home. Not because he had planned to, in fact he had not, but because he found himself sitting at the desk where Manju used to organize her papers, holding a pen, and the alternative to writing was simply sitting there holding a pen.

14 March.

Received the municipal notice today. Mitra is moving again. Sixty days.

I need to find out: (1) whether the original NGO registration still gives us any legal standing; (2) who

at the Corporation we can approach; (3) whether the relocation package in Schedule VII has ever actually been honored anywhere in this city.

Practical. I need to be practical.

He stopped. Looked at what he had written. The handwriting was neater than he expected, as though some part of him was performing competence for an audience that wasn't there.

He wrote one more line before he closed the notebook.

I don't know how to do this without you.

Then he closed it, and went to bed, and did not sleep for a long time.

The lawyer's name was Debashish Roy, and he worked from an office in Bhowanipore that smelled of mildew and old ambition. He had helped them once before, briefly, with a land tenure question, Manju had found him, had charmed him into reduced fees with two cups of tea and a frankness about their finances that Joseph had found excruciating and that Roy had apparently found irresistible.

Without Manju, the meeting was different.

Roy laid it out plainly. The community centre's registration as an NGO gave them standing to petition, to protest, to file objections, but not to

block. The demolition order, once issued, would be legal. Their only real weapon was delay, and delay required either a court injunction or political pressure, and a court injunction required money they did not have, and political pressure required: "*Connections*," Roy said, spreading his hands. "*Someone who can make Mitra's approvals inconvenient. Someone with leverage on the councillor.*"

"*Who is the councillor?"*

"*Biswas. Pradip Biswas. Ward 58.*" Roy paused. "*He is not an easy man.*"

"*Is there a less easy way to say that?"*

Roy almost smiled. "*He is Mitra's man. Has been for years. But he has opponents. There is a faction within the party, the old guard, who find Mitra's ambitions excessive. If you could get their ear*"

"*How?*"

"*That,*" Roy said carefully, "*is a matter of relationships. Of knowing the right people, approaching them in the right way, at the right moment."* He looked at Joseph with something that was not quite sympathy and not quite pity. "*Your wife was very good at that.*"

"*I know*," Joseph said. "*She was.*"

He thanked Roy, paid what he could, and walked home in the heat, feeling the city as he had not felt

it in months: loud, indifferent, vast. Manju had moved through Calcutta as though she had a private treaty with it. He had always been, underneath the years, still the boy from his Karnataka village who found the city slightly bewildering, who had relied on her to translate its moods.
He was translating alone now. And he was not fluent.

He called a meeting of the community. Sixty people crowded into the centre, more standing outside the windows, the ceiling fan pushing hot air in slow circles. He explained the letter. He explained the timeline. He explained, as clearly as he could, what their options were.
Then he made his first mistake.
He told them he had a plan.
He did not, in any honest sense, have a plan. He had a list of things to try, a rough sequence of approaches, a hope that one of them would yield something. But the faces in front of him, frightened, expectant, trusting, seemed to need the word *plan,* and so he used it, and watched something relax in the room when he did, and felt, even as he felt the relief of it, that he had just taken on a weight he didn't know how to carry.
Afterward, a man named Shyamal, middle-aged, careful, one of the more practical voices in the

community, pulled him aside.
"*Joseph*," he said. "*Who are we going to talk to? Which politician? Which party office?"*
"*I'm working on that.*"
"*Because my cousin knows someone in the TMC ward committee, not Biswas's faction, the other one.*"
"*Tell me more about that,*" Joseph said, and pulled out a notebook and wrote it all down. He wrote carefully, as though precision could substitute for understanding.
Walking home, he realized he had forgotten to ask the cousin's name.

19 March.
Meeting at the ward committee tomorrow. Shyamal's cousin, has arranged it through someone he knows. I don't fully understand the internal politics yet. Manju would have had it mapped within an hour, who owed what to whom, which grievances were live, which alliances were fraying. I am going in half-blind.
Sister Alphonsa says I am being too cautious. That what the community needs is someone visible: marches, press attention, noise. She is probably right. She usually is. But I keep thinking: visible to whom? Attention from whom? Without knowing which levers to pull, making noise might just harden Mitra's position.

Or I am telling myself that because I am afraid of the noise. Because the noise was always hers.
He paused. Looked at the page.
Manju, what would you do? Not the tactics, I know roughly what the tactics would be. I mean: how did you make yourself walk into rooms full of people who had reasons not to trust you, and leave them trusting you? Was it something you learned? Something you decided? Or was it just you?
I have been going over it in my mind, and I think it was something in the quality of your attention. You listened as though the person speaking was the only person in the world. I listened like a priest, with care, yes, but also with a small interior distance, a professional compassion. You didn't have that distance. I used to worry about you because of it. I used to think you were too exposed.
I understand now that it was not a vulnerability. It was the gift itself.

The ward committee meeting was a failure. Not a dramatic one, there were no raised voices, no doors slammed, which almost made it worse. The men he met were polite, interested in his problem in the way that people are interested in a problem that does not threaten them, and ultimately unmoved. Mitra's project brought investment, they said. The relocation

package was adequate, they said. There were proper procedures, they said.

He pushed too hard at one point, his voice rising slightly, and saw it register in their faces: not hostility, just a slight closing. He backed off too quickly after that, and felt them register that too.

He had not found the right pressure. He had not even found the right tone.

Outside, in the street, Tapan, Shyamal's cousin, a small, energetic man who seemed to find Joseph's presence faintly comic in an affectionate way said, "*It is not finished. These things take time. You must let them feel that you are serious but that you are also patient. That you are not going away*."

"*How long?"*

Tapan shrugged with his whole body. "*In Calcutta, these things: who knows. You must come again. You must be seen. You must drink tea with them. Many times*."

"*We have fifty-three days*."

"*Then you must drink tea very quickly*."

Joseph almost laughed. It surprised him, the almost-laugh. It had been a while.

Sister Alphonsa organized the first protest march without asking him. He found out about it the morning it was happening, when he arrived at the

centre and found forty people assembled with hand-painted signs: *ANANDA NAGAR ZINDABAD, MITRA GO BACK,* one child's sign in careful English letters that said simply *THIS IS OUR HOME.*

He looked at Sister Alphonsa.

She looked back at him with serene, absolute zero remorse.

"*You should walk at the front*," she said. "*You are taller. The cameras will find you.*"

"*You should have told me.*"

"*You would have said it was too soon.*"

"*It is too soon.*"

"*Perhaps. But it is also happening.*" She gestured toward the assembled marchers. "*They needed to do something with their hands.*"

He walked at the front. The press attention was modest: one local journalist, a photographer from a Bengali daily whose editor might or might not run the image. They marched through the lanes of Ananda Nagar to the boundary where Mitra's contractor had placed survey markers, and then back. People came out of doorways to watch. A few joined. It was small, and earnest, and slightly disorganized, and it made, in the great roaring machinery of the city, almost no sound at all.

But the faces of the people walking beside him: he noticed those. The way Shyamal's wife held her sign

as though it were something that mattered. The way the child with the English sign kept checking to make sure the letters were still legible.
He noticed.
He wrote about it that evening.

28 March.
I have been reading back through these entries and I see something happening that I didn't plan. The early ones are lists. Notes to myself. Instructions. And then, somewhere around the fifteenth, I started writing to you.
I don't know what to do with that. Whether it is healthy or not healthy, whether a doctor or a psychologist or a priest would approve of it. I only know that writing to you is different from writing to myself. When I write to myself, I am accounting. When I write to you, I am … I'm not sure. Thinking out loud. Arguing. Reporting back.
Is that what prayer is? I used to know the answer to that. I used to have a whole theology of it.
Now I just have these pages, and the knowledge that something in me insists on addressing itself to someone who is not here. I don't know what to call that insistence. I don't know if it needs a name.
Roy thinks we may be able to apply for an emergency injunction through the high court; it would not stop

Mitra permanently but it could suspend the sixty-day clock while the legal challenge proceeds. It would buy us time we do not yet know how to use.

Today we walked. It wasn't enough. Nothing so far has been enough. But we walked, and I watched Shyamal's wife hold her sign, and a child spelled out THIS IS OUR HOME in letters careful enough to break something open in the chest.

I'm still here, Manju. I don't know who I am without you but I am still here. I am making mistakes and drinking tea with people who will not help me and walking through lanes I never walk alone.

I think that might be enough for tonight.

I think, I am not sure, I think that might be something like enough.

Chapter Five
What the River Takes

The boy's name was Bijoy.

He was eight years old, small for his age, with a habit of arriving at the community centre before anyone else in the morning and sitting on the front step waiting, as though the day could not properly begin without him. He had been coming since he was five, when his mother, a woman named Champa who worked six days a week in a garment factory three kilometres away, had first brought him and asked, with the particular dignity of someone asking for something they feel they have no right to ask for, whether there was space for him during the day.

There had been space. There was always space, or they made it.

Bijoy was not a remarkable child in any way that would make a story neat. He was not especially clever, not especially beautiful, not gifted with some arresting quality that would make his loss feel, to a reader, pre-ordained. He was simply a child, curious, sometimes difficult, prone to a specific laugh that arrived without warning and transformed his whole face. He had been learning to write his name. The

letters came unevenly, the *j* always slightly too large, crowding the *o* beside it. He had been working on it for two weeks with a patience that Joseph, in retrospect, found quietly astonishing.

On the morning of the fourth of April, Bijoy did not arrive.

By noon, his mother was at the centre door.

At first it was a missing child, which is terrible but also, in a city of fifteen million, not unheard of. Children wandered. Children got lost. Children turned up at a relative's house, at a neighbour's, at a market stall where someone kind had given them a *samosa* and let them sit until the panic resolved itself into relief and then, later, into a scolding.

Joseph went with Champa through the lanes, asking. Sister Alphonsa organized the older children into search pairs. Shyamal and Tapan covered the market and the bus stops.

By evening, they had nothing.

By the second morning, a woman who sold vegetables near the northern boundary of Ananda Nagar told Joseph, quietly, looking at the ground as she spoke, that she had seen a boy matching Bijoy's description getting into a car. Not being dragged, getting in. As though he knew the person. Or as though he had been told to.

The car was white. She didn't know the plates. She

hadn't thought much of it at the time.

Joseph thanked her. He walked back to the centre. He sat down at his desk and put his hands flat on the surface and breathed, slowly, the way he had once been taught to breathe in moments of pastoral emergency, a technique that now seemed to belong to someone else's life.

Then he opened the drawer where he had kept Manju's address book.

He had not opened the address book in months. He had told himself he was leaving it for when he was ready, but the truth was simpler and less dignified than that: he was afraid of her handwriting. Afraid of the particular way she formed her letters, slightly forward-leaning, the loops open and unhurried. Afraid that seeing it would undo something he was holding together with considerable effort.

He opened it anyway.

She had kept the address book with the methodical warmth that characterized everything she organized: names, numbers, notes in the margins about who was reliable, who needed to be handled carefully, who had helped them and how. Two years of Calcutta contacts built one relationship at a time.

Near the C entries he found it: *Caritas Calcutta - Child Protection - Sunita Rao.* And beneath it, in smaller letters, a note in Manju's hand: *Knows*

everyone. Trustworthy. Call directly, don't go through the main desk.

He sat for a moment looking at the note. Then he picked up the phone.

The Caritas Calcutta office was on a side street in Bow Bazar, occupying the ground floor of a building that smelled of photocopier toner and instant coffee and the particular exhaustion of people doing necessary work with insufficient resources. A hand-lettered sign on the door listed its programs: child welfare, migrant support, emergency relief, legal aid. Below the sign, slightly crooked, a smaller notice: *Diocese of Calcutta Social Services.*

Joseph had known, of course, that Caritas operated under the diocesan structure. He had noted it and set it aside. He was here for information, not for institution.

Sunita Rao was a small, precise woman in her forties who had the manner of someone who had heard many urgent stories and learned to absorb them without being swept away. She listened to everything Joseph told her about Bijoy without interrupting. When he finished, she asked three questions, each one more specific than the last, and he understood from the questions that she already knew the shape of what he was describing.

"*How long has he been missing?*" she said.
"*Three days.*"
"*Police?*"
"*Inspector Ghosh. He took the report.*"
A pause, brief and expressive. "*I know Ghosh. We'll work around him.*" She opened a folder on her desk that seemed to already contain more information than Joseph had expected. "*There have been three other cases in the past six weeks. Different areas of the city, same profile: boys, eight to twelve, from communities currently under economic or displacement pressure. The pattern is not accidental.*"
Joseph went still. "*You've been tracking this.*"
"*We've been trying to. We have a network among the street communities, women mostly, who notice things and tell us things because they trust us more than they trust the police.*" She looked at him directly. "*Your centre has a good reputation. People in Ananda Nagar know the name Manju. That will open some doors for you that wouldn't open for us.*"
The name landed in his chest like a stone dropped into still water. He kept his expression steady.
"*What do you need from me?"* he said.
"*Talk to people. Carefully, no urgency in your voice, because urgency closes things. Just listen. And tell me what you hear.*" She wrote a number on a slip of paper and passed it across the desk. "*Call me*

directly. Any hour."
He looked at the slip of paper. Then he looked up at the Caritas poster on the wall behind her: a child's hands held in an adult's hands, the diocesan seal in the corner.
He took the paper and put it in his pocket and said nothing about the poster.

7 April.
I am not writing to you tonight. I am writing to myself because I need to think and I can't think in my own head anymore; there's too much noise in there.
Bijoy has been missing for three days. The police are useless or complicit or both, which in this city often amounts to the same thing. I went to the Caritas office today, I found Sunita Rao's name in your address book, with your note: knows everyone, trustworthy, call directly. I did what you told me.
She confirmed there's a hepattern. Three other children. All from communities under pressure.
She said people in Ananda Nagar know your name. That your name opens doors.
I don't know what to do with that. It is the most painful and the most useful thing anyone has said to me in months. You are dead and you are still building coalitions. You are still, somehow, making things possible.

I am going to try to use it. I am going to try to be worthy of the doors your name opens. I don't know if I can.
The developer's deadline: forty-four days. The child: missing three days. I am supposed to be fighting an evacuation and instead I am sitting in a Caritas office learning that the city has been quietly eating its children.
I know the mathematics of this. I know what Sunita Rao's careful face was telling me even when her words were still hopeful.
I know how rarely the river gives back what it takes.
There is another mathematics I do not write about. A child I have not allowed myself to think of directly since you died, since before that, since the hospital in Bhubaneswar, since the moment I understood what we had lost before I had even known fully what we had. I do not write about it because I cannot yet hold it steadily. But Bijoy's name in Champa's mouth, Bijoy's absence in the empty step where he should be sitting: something in me recognizes this terror from the inside. Not as a stranger to it. As someone who has already once held a loss of this particular shape.

He spent three days in Ananda Nagar's network of whispers.
He was not good at it. He was too direct, too obviously urgent, and urgency in these

conversations was a kind of pressure that made people close. He had to learn, again and slowly, to sit longer, to speak less, to let silences exist without filling them. Manju had known this instinctively. He was learning it in real time, making mistakes, feeling the conversations go cold and then trying to warm them again.

But things came.

A boy Bijoy's age had been seen near a white car two weeks before Bijoy disappeared, talking to a man through the window, taking something small, a coin perhaps or a sweet. The man had kind eyes, one woman said, and then caught herself, as though the information was too terrible to hold alongside each other: a kind-eyed man who took children.

A name surfaced, indirectly, not a full name, a nickname, *Chhotka,* meaning *small one,* used apparently with irony for a man who was not small. Associated with a market near the river.

Joseph called Sunita. She knew the name. She told him she had already passed it to a contact in the detective branch, one of the few, she said carefully, that she trusted. She told him to wait.

He gave her thirty-six hours. Then he went to the market anyway.

The market near the Hooghly was loud and layered,

a place of legitimate commerce on its surface and other transactions in its depths, the way the city often was. He walked through it for two hours, uselessly, knowing he was uselessly walking, knowing he had none of the skills for this, knowing that Bijoy was somewhere or nowhere and that his presence in a fish market was accomplishing nothing except the expenditure of the energy he didn't have.

At the edge of the market, near the river, he stopped. The Hooghly was brown and enormous and indifferent, moving with the slow certainty of something that has been moving for longer than any human trouble. He stood at the bank and looked at it. He thought of cholera. He thought of the water that had taken her, water that had moved through the city's pipes and its bodies and out again into some untraceable elsewhere.

He thought of Bijoy, small Bijoy with the oversized *j* crowding the *o,* and he felt something tear open in his chest that he had been keeping closed through sheer administrative effort for weeks, the forms and meetings and tea and letters, all of it a structure he had been building over a wound that hadn't healed and wasn't healing and had now, somehow, this boy's face on it.

He sat down on the concrete bank. An old man nearby was fishing, unhurriedly, as though time

were something he had made a private peace with.
Joseph sat there for a long time.
Then he walked home.

Sunita called at nine in the evening. Her voice was careful.
"*My contact moved on the information. There's a boy matching the description in a location they've identified. They're going in tomorrow morning; they need the paperwork tonight.*" A pause. "*Joseph. He's alive. As far as we know, right now, he is alive."*
He sat down on the floor. He didn't intend to sit on the floor, he was standing, and then he was on the floor of the room where Manju used to keep her files, surrounded by her organized stacks that he hadn't been able to move, and he pressed the phone against his ear and said: "*Tomorrow morning.*"
"*Yes. You cannot be there. I need you to understand that: you cannot be there.*"
"*I understand.*"
"*Get some sleep.*"
He put the phone down. He sat on the floor. The room was very quiet. Through the window he could hear the night sounds of Ananda Nagar: a dog, a radio, a child being called inside. The ordinary sounds of a place that still existed, that was still, for now, here.

He had forty-three days left to keep it that way.
He sat on the floor for a long time, and the thing that had been tearing open in his chest tore a little further, and then a little further still, and when it finally tore all the way through there was no sound, just a vast interior silence, and in that silence something that had been held under enormous pressure for months finally, finally rose.

He does not remember, afterward, going to the window.
He is at the window, but his sight goes well beyond what the eyes can see. The night outside. The lane below, empty now, lit by the one streetlight that still works, the others long dead. The community centre across the way, dark, its painted sign just visible: *Ananda Nagar Community Centre. All Are Welcome.* Manju had often spoken on that. He had thought it was too simple. She had said: *The simpler the better. People need to believe it the moment they read it.*
He believes in nothing at the moment he reads it.
He opens his mouth. What comes out is not words, not at first, it is something rougher and more embarrassing than words, a sound from somewhere beneath language, and he lets it come because there is no one to hear it and because he cannot stop it anyway.

Then the words.

Where were You!

Not a question. The inflection is wrong for a question. It is an accusation, flat and final, the way you speak to someone who was supposed to be there and wasn't.

Where were You when she was dying? She was thirty-four years old. She gave everything, everything, and You let cholera take her in three days. Three days. She died calling for water and I couldn't…

He stops. Presses his forehead against the glass. The glass is cool. Below, the lane is still empty. The streetlight hums its one dull note.

And this child. This child. Eight years old. Learning to write his name. Is that what You do? You let a man with kind eyes take a child who is learning to write his name? Is that the world You made? Is that what You're proud of?

His voice is rising. He doesn't care. The walls are thin but he doesn't care, not tonight, not with the glass cool against his forehead and the weight of months pressing through him like a hand.

I gave You everything. I gave You thirty years. I wore Your collar and I said Your words and I believed, I believed, and You took her and You left me here with a notice on government stationery and a missing child and forty-three days and I don't know what I'm doing.

I don't know what I'm doing. I am making it up as I go and she is dead and I am standing in her room and I…

He cannot finish the sentence. He is not sure what the end of the sentence is.

He stands at the window. Below, the lane is still empty. The sign says *All Are Welcome* in the dark.

He says, at last, very quietly:

I needed You to show up. Just once. Just I needed You to be there.

The silence after this is absolute. No answering wind. No shift in the light. No comfort arrives.

He stands at the window for a long time in the silence that does not answer.

And somewhere in that silence, in the body of it, in its sheer unrelenting uninflected fact, he is still standing. He is still at the window. He is still, in some sense he cannot name and will not claim and does not understand, here. Still putting words into the dark. Still, even now, even bitter, even raging, addressing himself to something.

He doesn't know what to call that. He won't call it anything tonight.

He closes the window. He goes to the desk. He opens the journal.

11 April.

Bijoy is alive. I think he is alive. I am told he is alive. Tomorrow morning.

I spoke to God tonight for the first time in eight months. I don't think I would call it prayer. I don't think God would call it prayer. It was more like serving papers. Presenting a charge.

I don't know if anyone received it.

I don't know what it would mean if no one did.

I don't know what it would mean if someone did.

I am going to try to sleep now. Tomorrow they will bring the boy home, or they won't. Tomorrow I will have forty-three days, or I will have forty-two. Tomorrow Manju will still be dead.

It is extraordinary that the world keeps being this real.

I am still here.

Chapter Six
What We Hold Between Us

It began, as these things often do in Calcutta, with a rumour.

The rumour arrived on a Wednesday morning in the form of three different versions of the same story, spreading through Ananda Nagar the way smoke spreads, low, fast, finding every opening. In one version, a Hindu shopkeeper in the lane near the northern boundary had been attacked by Muslim youths. In another, a Muslim family's door had been painted with a symbol overnight and their water supply interfered with. In a third version, which Joseph heard from Shyamal and which had the particular texture of something closer to the truth, a group of men, outsiders, nobody recognized them, had been seen moving through the area the previous night, speaking to people, leaving behind a specific quality of agitation.

Joseph listened to all three versions and wrote

nothing in his practical notebook. He sat with the information the way Manju had taught him to sit with information, letting it settle, looking for the shape beneath the surface details.

The shape was familiar. It had appeared once before, in the early days of the evacuation notice, when similar rumours had moved through the community and a small but ugly confrontation had broken out near the market. That time, Manju had moved through the lanes for three days straight, talking to people, sitting in doorways, drinking tea until she was ill from it, and the thing had subsided. She had known, with the instinct she had for these things, that the rumours had not grown from genuine communal grievance but from something applied from outside, deliberately, like a match held to dry wood.

She was not here now.

Joseph called Sister Alphonsa, then Shyamal, then Sunita Rao at Caritas. He asked each of them the same question: who in the community had the relationships that crossed the Hindu-Muslim boundary, who was trusted on both sides, who could move between the two without being read as partisan.

The answers were thin. Manju had been one of those people. Her absence left a gap that none of them had

fully mapped until now.
By Thursday afternoon, the wood was burning.

He heard it before he saw it, a sound that was not quite a crowd and not quite a storm but partook of both, a low roar with human voices in it, the particular register of collective rage which, once heard, is never mistaken for anything else.
He was at the centre when it began. Through the window he could see smoke rising from the direction of the northern lanes, thin at first, then thicker, the oily black of something structural burning. His phone rang: Shyamal, his voice compressed with urgency, telling him that a group of men had attacked three Muslim households near the boundary, that there had been fighting, that at least two people were badly hurt.
"*The men, the attackers …*"
"*Outsiders*," Shyamal said. "*Same as before. Nobody knows them.*"
Joseph stood at the window for perhaps four seconds. Then he turned and began doing the only thing he knew how to do, which was to prepare the space for what was coming.
He moved the tables. He found the first aid supplies, inadequate, he noted, they needed more, and laid them out on the cleared surface. He filled every

container they had with water. He unlocked the back entrance so people could come in from the lane without passing through the front, which would face whatever was moving through the streets.
He was pulling mattresses from the storage room when he heard the front door open and turned to find Leena.

She looked, in the first moment, exactly as she had looked the last time he had properly seen her, at Manju's funeral, standing apart from the main group, her face doing the work of composure with visible effort. She was a small woman, precise in her movements, with the quality of someone who had learned to carry a great deal without showing the weight.
She was carrying a large bag. Medical supplies, he would discover, she had stopped at a pharmacy on her way.
"*I heard from Sunita*," she said. "*I came*."
No preamble. No acknowledgment of the months of distance between them. He understood this immediately and was grateful for it.
"*The back room is cleared*," he said. "*I need someone who knows what to do with the medical supplies*."
"*I know what to do*," she said. And she did.
She moved through the centre with the efficiency of

someone who had done this before, who had, in fact, done something very close to this before, in the lanes of Ananda Nagar during the cholera, moving from house to house with Manju beside her. Joseph watched her for a moment, this woman who had stood beside his wife in the worst of it, and felt something that was not quite grief and not quite gratitude but contained both.

Then the first people arrived, and there was no more time for feeling anything but useful.

They came in waves. First the injured, two men with head wounds, a woman with burns on her forearm, a boy of perhaps twelve who was not visibly hurt but could not stop shaking. Then the displaced, families whose doors had been broken, whose few possessions had been thrown into the lane, who stood in the centre's main room with the stunned expression of people who have just learned, again, that safety is conditional. Then others, not directly affected but frightened, coming because the centre was a known place, a place whose sign said *All Are Welcome* and which they had decided, in this moment, to believe.

By evening, there were forty people in the building. By nine o'clock, nearly sixty.

Joseph moved among them doing the things that

needed doing: water, food, a place to sit, a reassuring word where a reassuring word was possible and an honest one where it wasn't. He noticed, with a distant part of his mind, that he was doing these things without thinking about them, that some older competence had engaged, something from the years in Balajinagar, when this kind of pastoral emergency had been simply part of the work.

He had not known that competence was still in him. He had thought it belonged to the person he used to be.

Sister Alphonsa appeared at his elbow at some point in the evening. She looked at him with an expression he couldn't quite read.

"*What?*" he said.

"*Nothing*," she said. "*You are doing well. That is all.*"

Lavinia had been at the centre when it started, she came every day now, had for the past two months, slipping into the rhythm of the place with a naturalness that Joseph had noticed but not yet fully examined. During the crisis she moved through the crowded rooms with a quiet authority that surprised him, knowing which children needed distraction and which adults needed silence, finding blankets that Joseph hadn't known they had, organizing the older girls into a small team that kept

the younger children occupied in the corner with songs and simple games.

He watched her at one point across the room, she was sitting on the floor with four small children arranged around her, her voice low and steady, telling them something that made them lean toward her slightly. A story, he thought. She was telling them a story.

Later, when things had settled enough that he could think in consecutive sentences again, he found her in the kitchen area washing cups.

"*You were remarkable tonight*," he said.

She looked up, briefly surprised, then returned to the washing.

"*There was work to do.*"

"*There's always work to do. Not everyone does it the way you did.*"

She was quiet for a moment. Then:

"*The children needed someone to stay calm. So I stayed calm.*"

He thought about this.

"*Where did you learn that?*"

"*From my mother*," she said. "*And from watching Manju didi.*"

The name fell between them quietly. He let it settle.

"*Lavinia,*" he said. "*I have been thinking about something. The centre needs people who are properly*

trained in early childhood education, in teaching methods. Not just capable, which you already are, but formally qualified." He paused. "*There is a program at the Loreto College extension, evening classes, two years. I would like the centre to sponsor you. Fully, fees, materials, whatever is needed.*"

She turned to look at him properly now.

"*You need people here who can build something that lasts,*" he said. "*You have the gift. I want to give you the foundation to go with it.*"

She didn't answer immediately. He had noticed this about her, she did not give quick answers to things that mattered. She thought, and then she spoke.

"*My family …*" she began.

"*Will be provided for. Your work here continues, the studying would be in the evenings.*" He looked at her steadily. "*Your father wants a secure future for you. This is a secure future. Not the only kind, but a real one.*"

She looked at him for a moment longer. Then she turned back to the cups and said, quietly:

"*Thank you, Joseph bhai.*"

He left her to the washing and went back into the main room where sixty displaced people were trying to sleep, and thought that perhaps he was beginning, slowly and without any clear intention, to build something.

He found Rajan at two in the morning.

The boy, seventeen, though he carried it like someone older, with the particular aging that comes not from years but from chronic alertness, was sitting in the far corner of the storeroom, behind a stack of plastic chairs, in the dark. He was not hiding, exactly. He was simply occupying a space where no one would require anything of him.

Joseph had come for a box of candles and found him instead.

He did not make a fuss of it. He found the candles, set them down, and sat on a crate.

"*Rajan*," he said.

"*I didn't do anything*," Rajan said. Reflexive, automatic, the response of someone accustomed to being accused.

"*I know*," Joseph said. "*I'm not here about that.*"

Silence. Outside, muffled, the sounds of the crowded centre, someone coughing, a child crying briefly and then stopping.

Rajan was from the centre's periphery, he came sometimes, irregularly, more often in the months since Manju had died, as though her absence had made the place both more accessible and less meaningful to him. He was quick, Joseph had noticed, in a way that had not yet found its direction.

He had the energy of someone to whom the available channels were all too small or too compromised, who was building a pressure inside himself that would eventually need somewhere to go.

Joseph recognized this because he had felt it himself once. Not the same circumstances, not the same life. But the same interior mood, the sense of an energy that the approved structures could not contain, that threatened constantly to express itself in the wrong direction simply because no right direction had been made available.

In Balajinagar, he had watched boys with that character end up in places from which they did not return. He had sat with their mothers afterward. He had said the things one says, which were never enough, which he had known even then were never enough.

"*Where were you tonight?*" Joseph said. Not an accusation. Simply a question.

A long pause.

"*Near the boundary. When it started.*"

"*Doing what?*"

Another pause. Longer.

"Watching."

"Just watching."

Rajan looked at him sideways.

"*There were men there I know. From the city. They*

were … they were doing things." He stopped.
"*You knew them*."
"I've seen them. They move around. They find …" He stopped again. Then, with a kind of controlled precision, as though choosing each word carefully: "*They find people who are angry and they give the anger somewhere to go*."
Joseph looked at him steadily. "*And you're angry*."
No answer. Which was an answer.
"*What are you angry about?"* Joseph said.
What came next surprised him, not the content but the speed of it, the absence of the usual adolescent deflection:
"*Everything is being taken. My father came here twenty years ago and built something, a little, not much, but something. And now they want to take the land and they use us to fight each other so we don't fight them, and everybody can see it, everybody knows what's happening, and nobody can do anything, and …*" He stopped himself. His hands, Joseph noticed, were pressed flat against his thighs. Holding still.
"*And someone offered you a way to do something*," Joseph said quietly.
The silence confirmed it.
Joseph looked at the floor. He thought about what to say and discarded three things before he found the

honest one.

"*I spent twenty years being angry about things I couldn't change*," he said. "*I was a priest, I had the collar, the role, the institution around me. And underneath all of it I was angry, and I had nowhere to put it, and I pushed it down so far that when it finally came up it came up all at once and I walked away from everything.*" He paused. "*I am not telling you that was right. I am telling you it was what happened when a man's energy has nowhere legitimate to go.*"

Rajan was very still now. Listening.

"*The men who gave your anger somewhere to go tonight*," Joseph said. "*Who do they work for, in the end?"*

A long moment. Then, quietly: "*Mitra.*"

"Yes," Joseph said. "*Mitra. Who wants the land and needs us fighting each other to get it.*" He let this sit. "*Your anger is not wrong, Rajan. Your anger is completely correct. The question is whether you use it or whether it uses you.*"

He didn't resolve anything that night. He had learned enough of people to know that resolution doesn't happen in a single conversation in a storeroom at two in the morning. What happened was simpler and more durable: Rajan stayed. He did not go back to

the boundary. He fell asleep eventually on a mat in the corner of the main room, surrounded by sixty displaced people, and in the morning he was still there, and Joseph set him to work without ceremony, carrying water and moving furniture and doing the hundred practical things that a crisis requires.

Rajan worked without being asked twice. Joseph watched him and said nothing and noted it.

17 April.

The riot has passed, or subsided, which is not the same thing. Two families have lost almost everything. The Muslim households near the boundary will need support for weeks. The Hindu families who were pressured into participating, and most of them were pressured, this was not genuine communal feeling, Shyamal confirmed this, it matches what Manju saw the first time, are caught now between shame and the residual fear that started it.

Leena was here. It was strange and not strange. We worked side by side for six hours without speaking about you at all, which was the only way we could work side by side for six hours. She is… she is herself. Precise. Competent. She has her own grief and I have mine and we did not compare them.

She is coming back tomorrow. There is still work to do.

I spoke to Rajan tonight. I don't know if I said the right things. I said the honest things, which is not always the same. He is still here. That will have to be enough for now.
Lavinia organized the children during the worst of it and then washed cups afterward as though both were simply the next thing to do. I have offered her the Loreto program. She said yes in the way she says things, quietly, after thinking, as though the yes had been there already and only needed to be confirmed.
Manju, the centre held. The building you never saw finished held sixty people tonight and none of them were turned away. I don't know if that's enough. I don't know if any of this is enough. But it held.
Less than thirty days left on the evacuation notice.
We are still here.

In the morning, before anyone else was awake, Joseph stood in the main room among the sleeping figures and looked at what the night had made.
Leena asleep in a chair, her head tilted at the uncomfortable angle of someone who had refused to leave. Lavinia on a mat near the children, one small hand resting on her arm. Rajan on the floor, deeply, utterly asleep, with the abandoned quality of someone who has not slept properly in a long time and has finally, in this unlikely place, allowed

themselves to stop.

The early light came through the windows at its low angle, finding the dust in the air, the worn floor, the stacked chairs, the sign on the wall that said *All Are Welcome*.

Joseph stood among them and felt something he did not immediately have a name for.

It was not happiness. It was not peace. It was something more like recognition. As though some part of him that had been looking at his life from the outside, unable to find a way back in, had taken one step closer to the door.

He went to make tea. There were people to feed, and less than thirty days, and a great deal still to do.

Part Three: The Threshold

Chapter Seven
The Threshold

The letter from the Methodist board arrived on a Monday, which Joseph had begun to think of as the designated day for letters that changed things. It was signed by the new secretary, a man named Mr. Deb whom Joseph had met twice and found both times to be a person of precise convictions and limited imagination. The language was cordial. The concern it expressed was not.

The board, Mr. Deb wrote, had been reviewing the community outreach programs under their moral and financial support. They were encouraged by the educational work, by the health initiatives, by the

evident commitment of the staff. They wished, however, to raise a matter of pastoral orientation. A recent informal survey of the centre's beneficiaries had indicated that the overwhelming majority were from Muslim families, with a smaller proportion of Hindu families, and a number that Mr. Deb described, with careful understatement, as *not reflective of the centre's Christian founding principles.* The board was not, Mr. Deb was careful to say, suggesting exclusion. They were suggesting *reorientation.* Programming that more explicitly reflected Christian values. Outreach that prioritized the Christian community. Perhaps, he added, some form of regular devotional component that beneficiaries might be encouraged, not required, of course, not required, to attend.

Joseph read the letter twice. Then he set it on the desk and looked at the wall for a long moment.

On the wall was a photograph that Manju had put there in the first weeks after the centre opened, a group of children from the neighbourhood, maybe twenty of them, crowded together and squinting into the sun. Hindu children, Muslim children, two Christian families' children among them. Manju had put it there because she said it was the only program document that told the truth about what they were doing.

He picked up his pen and wrote his reply.

He was not intemperate in the letter. He had learned, across the years, that intemperance in letters was a way of feeling righteous while losing the argument, and he had no interest in feeling righteous. He wrote carefully, with the precision of someone who has thought a long time about what he believes and is now required to say it plainly.

He wrote that the centre served the community as the community presented itself. That Ananda Nagar was a neighbourhood of mixed faith, and that any program which prioritized one community over others would not be serving the neighbourhood but partitioning it. He wrote that he understood the board's desire for explicit Christian witness, and that he respected it, but that his own understanding of Christian witness in this place was precisely the refusal to make human need conditional on religious identity. That the centre's open door was not a failure of Christian principle but its expression.

He wrote, at the end, that he could not in conscience reorient the centre's programs as the board suggested, and that he hoped they could find a way to continue their valued support on the basis of the work as it actually existed.

He sealed the letter and posted it and did not allow

himself to think too much about what would follow. What followed was silence, which was itself a kind of answer. No formal withdrawal, no confrontation. Simply, over the weeks of May, a slowing. A request for roof repair materials that received no response. A delivery of school supplies that arrived half what had been promised, with a note citing budget constraints. A meeting that was postponed and then not rescheduled.

Sister Alphonsa noticed before he named it to her. She came to him one afternoon with the accounts and set them on the desk without speaking, which was her way of speaking very loudly.

"*I know*," he said.

"*The foundation?*"

"*Still solid. Manju's father …*" He stopped. "*We will manage.*"

"*For now*," she said. Not unkindly. Simply accurately.

"For now," he agreed.

It was Sunita Rao at Caritas who suggested the meeting at the diocesan office. There was a lawyer there, she said, who had been following the Mitra case and had some thoughts on the injunction they had partially obtained, partial being the operative word, enough to delay the demolition but not to stop it, a breathing space that felt less like victory than

like a long inhale before something difficult.

The diocesan offices were in a building Joseph had passed many times without entering, a colonial-era structure near Park Street, slightly worn, with a garden that someone tended carefully and a reception area that smelled of floor polish and old wood. A young woman at the desk directed him to the third floor.

He was early. The lawyer was not yet there.

A door at the end of the corridor stood open, and through it, Joseph could see the side chapel, small, lit by two windows and a bank of candles, empty in the middle of the afternoon. He stood in the corridor for a moment. Then he went in.

The smell reached him first.

Candle wax and incense and old stone, the specific compound of a Catholic sacred space that is different from any other smell in the world and that the body, once formed in it, never entirely forgets. He had not been inside a Catholic church since… he calculated, and the calculation itself was strange, since Bhubaneswar, four years ago, a funeral for a man from the community, attended out of duty, endured at the back with his collar already a question he was asking himself.

This was different. He was not enduring anything. He had simply walked through an open door.

He sat in the last pew. The chapel was very quiet. At the front, the tabernacle lamp burned its small continuous red, that ancient signal of presence, or of the claim of presence, which he had grown up believing in absolutely and which he now regarded with the complicated attention one gives to something that was once home.

He did not pray. He was clear with himself about that. He was sitting in a quiet room, and the room happened to have a tabernacle in it, and the tabernacle lamp happened to be burning, and none of this meant anything in particular.

But his hands, he noticed, had folded themselves in his lap in the old way. Without his permission. The muscle memory of thirty years.

He thought of Joel.

Joel who had prayed with the naturalness of breathing, who had never seemed to experience faith as a question because for him it was simply the atmosphere he lived in, not naive, not unconsidered, but genuinely and constitutively at home in God in a way that Joseph had admired and half-envied from the earliest days of the seminary. Joel who had died in the middle of a life that was nowhere near finished, whose death had been the first great rupture, the first time Joseph had looked at the architecture of his belief and seen the cracks

running through it.

And Ananda, who had known Joel better than anyone, who had sat with Joseph after Joel's death and said things he had not been ready to hear and had heard anyway. Who had sat with him again, years later, and told him the truth about Manju and himself with a directness that had felt like surgery and had healed something he hadn't known was infected.

He had not written to her since Manju died. He had told himself he would, and then the days had accumulated into months and the months into the particular paralysis of grief that mistakes stillness for dignity.

The tabernacle lamp burned. The candles burned. Outside, the city conducted its enormous indifferent business.

Joseph sat in the last pew with his hands folded in the old way and felt, for the first time in a very long time, the specific quality of a silence that seemed to be … not empty. He would not say more than that. He would not claim more than that. But not empty.

He was still sitting there when the lawyer arrived and the young woman from reception came to find him, and he rose and straightened his jacket and went to do what he had come to do.

3 June.

I sat in a chapel today. I want to be precise about this: I did not go to the chapel. I went to a meeting at the diocesan offices and arrived early and the door was open. I went in because the door was open.

I sat for perhaps twenty minutes.

I thought about Joel. I thought about Ananda. I thought about the years when prayer was not a problem to be solved but simply something I did, the way I breathed, the way I ate, not always well, not always with full attention, but continuously, as a condition of life.

I don't know when it stopped being that. It didn't stop all at once. It thinned, I think, over years, the institution thickening around it, the roles and the duties and the administration of faith gradually displacing the thing itself. And then Manju died and what was left of the thing, the thin remainder went out like a lamp in a wind.

But today in the chapel I noticed something. My hands folded by themselves. Thirty years of muscle memory, folding my hands.

The body remembers what the mind has given up on. I don't know what to do with that.

I am going to write to Ananda.

He wrote the letter that night. Three drafts, the first

too formal, the distance of months making him stiff; the second too confessional, lurching suddenly into things he wasn't sure he was ready to say; the third simply honest, which is always the hardest register to find and the only one that works with people who know you.

He told her about Manju. He told her about the centre, the evacuation fight, Bijoy, the riot, the Methodist board. He told her about the chapel, briefly, without overstating it. He told her he was lost in a way that was different from the other times he had been lost, not the crisis of Balajinagar, not the rupture of leaving, not the disorientation of Bhubaneswar. Something quieter and more fundamental. A man who has forgotten not just how to pray but what praying was for, and who has started to wonder if the forgetting is permanent.

He asked if he might come to see her.

He posted it the next morning before he could reconsider.

Her reply came eight days later, in the handwriting he remembered, firm, slightly angular, the handwriting of someone who means what they write. *Come,* she had written. *I am old and I tire easily but I am still here and I have been wondering when you would find your way back to asking for help. Come soon. Bring nothing, you always brought too many*

books. Just come.

He read it twice. Then he did something he had not done in a long time, he laughed, genuinely, the kind of laugh that arrives without warning and is gone before you can examine it.

He booked a train to Hyderabad for the following Friday.

The Sisters of Mercy house in Secunderabad was set back from the road behind a whitewashed wall, with a garden that had the slightly overgrown quality of a place where the residents had more important things to attend to than decorating the edges. A young sister met him at the gate and led him through a courtyard where two older women sat in the shade of a neem tree, talking quietly. The air smelled of jasmine and dust and something cooking, rice, he thought, and lentils, the smell of institutional meals which was itself a kind of homecoming.

Ananda was waiting for him in a small sitting room off the main corridor.

She was smaller than he remembered. This was the first thing, the way age had condensed her, drawn her inward toward some essential self. Her hair was fully white now, cut short under her veil. Her hands, folded in her lap, were the hands of someone very old, the skin thin, the veins present. But her eyes

were exactly as they had always been: dark, steady, with that quality of attention that had always made Joseph feel simultaneously seen and safe.
She looked at him for a long moment without speaking.
"*You look terrible*," she said.
"*Thank you, Ananda*."
"*Sit down. They're bringing tea*."
He sat. The room was simply furnished, two chairs, a small table, a crucifix on the wall, a window looking onto the courtyard. Through the window he could see the two old sisters still talking under the neem tree, unhurried, as though they had all the time that remained to them and had made a peace with its quantity.
"*Tell me*," Ananda said.

He told her everything. Not efficiently, he circled, doubled back, lost the thread and found it again. She did not hurry him. She sat with her hands folded and her eyes on him and listened in the way she had always listened, which was as though the listening itself were a form of action, as though her attention were doing something to the things he said, clarifying them.
When he finished, she was quiet for a while.
Then she said:

"*You are angry with God.*"
"*I accused Him, yes. One night at the window. It was not dignified.*"
"*Good,*" she said. "*The dignified prayers are the least honest ones.*" She shifted slightly in her chair.
"*Joel used to say that the Psalms are full of men screaming at God. That this was their first recommendation.*"
The name fell into the room gently, the way she had always handled it, not avoided, not overemphasized. Simply present.
"*I have been writing,*" Joseph said. "*A journal. It started as practical notes and then became … I started writing to Manju. And then …*" He stopped.
"*And then?"* she said.
"*The address started to … expand. I don't know how else to say it. I was writing to her and then I was writing to something larger. I didn't intend it. I don't know what it means.*"
Ananda looked at him steadily. "*I think you know what it means.*"
"*I'm not ready to call it that.*"
"*Then don't call it anything. The name can wait."* She leaned forward slightly. "*Joseph. You have been doing the works of mercy for years without a name for what you are doing. You have been sheltering the homeless and visiting, in a manner of speaking, those*

in danger and instructing those who needed guidance. You have been doing all of this while telling yourself you are simply a man running a community centre." She paused. "The grace does not require you to acknowledge it to be operative."

He looked at the crucifix on the wall. Then at his hands.

"*I don't know if I can go back*," he said. "*To the Church. To … any of it.*"

"*I am not asking you to go back*," she said. "*Going back is not possible and would not be desirable even if it were. What you had before, the certainty, the institution, the clear edges of the role, that is gone and it is not coming back and that is not entirely a loss.*"

She looked at him with great directness. "*What I am suggesting is that you go forward. Which is different.*"

"*Toward what?"*

"*Toward what you are already doing. But with your eyes open.*" She settled back. "*The journal, keep writing in it. But write honestly. Write to God the way you wrote to Manju, without decorum, without the language of piety. Write the anger and the confusion and the half-belief. Write it all.*" A small pause. "*God has heard worse. God has heard Joel, for one.*"

Something moved in Joseph's chest. He kept his face still.

"*And the work?"* he said.

"*The work is the work. It does not need to become religious to be sacred. It already is*." She looked at him with something that was almost severity and was also entirely love. "*You left the priesthood, Joseph. You did not leave God. God, I suspect, has been finding this distinction less significant than you have*."

He stayed two days. They talked, not always about the large things, often about small ones, the daily texture of her life in the sisters' house, the news from the congregation, a book she had been reading, a young sister whose vocation she was helping to discern. He ate meals in the refectory with the community, simple food eaten in the particular silence of people accustomed to silence, and found that the silence did not oppress him but settled something.

On the second evening they sat again in the small sitting room as the light changed outside and she asked him about Manju, not the death, but the life. What she had been like. How they had worked together. What she had taught him.

He talked for a long time. Ananda listened. At some point he realized he was smiling, not despite the grief but somehow alongside it, the way you can hold two things at once when someone creates enough space

for both.
"*She sounds extraordinary*," Ananda said.
"*She was ordinary*," Joseph said. "*That was the extraordinary thing about her. She was completely, specifically herself. No performance. No distance*." He paused. "*I spent thirty years with a professional distance between myself and everything. She didn't have it. I thought it made her vulnerable. It was her greatest strength*."
Ananda nodded slowly. "*And you are learning to live without the distance*."
"*I am learning that I have no choice*."
"*That,*" she said, "*is usually how it begins*."

On the morning of his departure she walked with him to the gate, slowly, with the careful gait of someone navigating the distance between what the body can do and what the will requires of it. At the gate she took both his hands in hers, her old hands thin and warm and very present.
"*Write to me*," she said. "*Not when things happen. Just, write*."
"*I will*."
"*And Joseph*." She looked at him with those steady dark eyes. "*The journal. When you write to God, and you are writing to God, whether you call it that or not, don't try to be coherent. Don't try to have conclusions.*

Just keep the conversation open." A small pause. *"That is all prayer ever was. Keeping the conversation open.*"

He embraced her carefully, conscious of her fragility. She patted his back twice, briskly, as though approving of something.

He walked to the auto-rickshaw that was waiting. At the corner he turned and she was still at the gate, small and white-haired and entirely herself, watching him go.

He raised his hand. She raised hers.

He did not cry until the train, which he thought she would have considered appropriate.

14 June. On the train back to Calcutta.

Ananda says I am writing to God whether I call it that or not. I am going to write that down and look at it.

I am writing to God whether I call it that or not.

I don't know if I believe it. I know I don't not believe it, which may be where faith has to start when everything else has been taken away, not with conviction but with the simple inability to finally, completely close the door.

The door is not closed. I have been standing at it for months, not going in, not walking away. Just standing.

Maybe that is enough for now. Maybe standing at the

door is its own kind of faithfulness.

Manju, I am going to keep writing to you. But I think the address is getting larger. I think you would understand that. I think you would say: yes, of course, it was always larger than the two of us, that was the whole point.

Calcutta in four hours. Ananda Nagar. The injunction holds for now, thirty more days, Sunita thinks, before Mitra's lawyers move again. Rajan is holding. Lavinia is registered for the Loreto program beginning in August. Leena comes every Tuesday and Thursday.

The work continues.

I think, I am not certain, I will not claim certainty but I think I am beginning to understand that the work and the prayer are not two different things that I lost one of. I think they may have been the same thing all along, and what I lost was only the ability to see that.

Keep the conversation open, she said.

All right. I am keeping it open.

I am still here.

Chapter Eight
The Art of Sitting Still

Sister Alphonsa brought it up on a Tuesday, which had become, since Leena's return, the day the centre felt most like itself, Leena running the older children's literacy group in the main room, Lavinia with the younger ones in the side room, Rajan shifting furniture and pretending not to listen to everything happening around him with an attention that Joseph had learned to read as his particular form of engagement.

They were in the small back office going over the accounts, the Methodist support now reduced to a trickle, the foundation funds solid but not unlimited, a grant application to a European NGO that Sunita Rao had helped him prepare and which might or might not yield anything in three to four months. Sister Alphonsa moved through numbers with the same brisk economy she brought to everything, her pencil making small precise marks in the margin.

When they finished she did not immediately close the folder.

"*I want to tell you something about myself*," she said.

Joseph looked up. In all the months of working side by side, Sister Alphonsa had never begun a sentence that way.

"*All right*," he said.

"*I am from Thrissur*," she said. "*I entered the congregation when I was nineteen. Before that I was … I was not a person who found God easy*." She said this without drama, as a simple statement of biographical fact. "*I had a formator in my early years who was not helpful. Who had answers for everything. Who made me feel that my questions were a form of weakness*." She paused. "*I nearly left.*"

Joseph said nothing. He understood that this was being offered carefully and deserved careful reception.

"*There was a priest*," she continued. "*A friend of the congregation. He had worked in Bangladesh for many years and come back, not broken, but changed in a way that made him different from the other priests I had known. He sat with me three times and said almost nothing useful and everything necessary."* She looked at Joseph directly. "*He is old now. He lives at the Jesuit house on Rawdon Street. His name is Father Thomas Kuruvilla.*"

A pause.

"*I think you should meet him*," she said.

Joseph looked at the closed accounts folder. "*I have*

just come back from Hyderabad," he said.
"*I know. And something came back with you from Hyderabad that wasn't there before*." She stood, smoothing her sari with the decisive gesture that meant the conversation was over. "*I am not sending you to be fixed. I am telling you that there is a person in this city who knows how to sit with someone without fixing them."* She picked up the folder. "*That is a rarer gift than it sounds."*
She left him with the accounts and the information and the particular feeling of being known by someone who had never made a production of knowing him.

He called the Jesuit house the following day. A young priest answered, polite and slightly rushed, and went to find Father Thomas. There was a long pause, long enough that Joseph had time to reconsider, and then a voice, deep and slow, with the unhurried quality of someone for whom time had reorganized itself into something more spacious.
"*Yes*," the voice said. Not hello. Just yes, as though continuing a conversation already in progress.
"*Father Thomas. My name is Joseph Tiruvalli. I am … I work at a community centre in Ananda Nagar. Sister Alphonsa suggested I call."*
"*Alphonsa*," the voice said, warmly. *"How is she?"*

"*Formidable*," Joseph said.
A sound that might have been a laugh. "*She has always been formidable. Even when she was twenty and terrified, she was formidable*." A pause. "*Come and have coffee. Thursday morning, if that suit*s."
"*Thursday suits*."
"*Good. Come at ten. Don't dress up*."
The line went quiet. Joseph held the phone for a moment, aware that he had just agreed to something without fully deciding to.

Tuesday, 24 June.
I am writing this before Thursday because I want to be honest about what I am feeling before I go and before the going, changes what I remember feeling.
I am afraid he will be like the others. The ones who listen with half an ear and then open a catechism, metaphorically speaking, who hear you say I had left the priesthood and immediately begin, with great gentleness and great firmness, to work on returning you to it. As though you were a problem with a known solution and their task was simply to apply it patiently enough.
I am afraid he will not understand the life I have been living. The slum, Manju, the evacuation fight, Bijoy, the riot. The way the work and the doubt and the grief have all become one thing that I cannot separate into

the categories that make it easier for institutional religion to process.
And underneath both fears — which I am writing here because Ananda told me to be honest and I am trying, underneath both fears is something else. A hope that is almost embarrassing in its nakedness. The hope that he will simply be able to sit with me. That I will be able to say the things I have only said in this journal and to Ananda and to God at a window at two in the morning, and that someone physically present in the same room will hear them without flinching and without immediately trying to resolve them.
Joel could do that. Ananda can do that. I do not know if Father Thomas Kuruvilla can do that.
I will find out on Thursday.

The Jesuit house on Rawdon Street was quieter than the street outside suggested possible — a tall gate, a short path, a building that had the solid, slightly faded dignity of a place that had been doing the same things for a long time and saw no reason to change. A young brother let him in and led him to a sitting room at the back of the ground floor, overlooking a small garden where a cat was conducting a patient investigation of the flowerbeds.
Father Thomas was already there.
He was a large man, or had been; age had reduced

him somewhat, softened the frame, but the underlying structure remained, wide shoulders, large hands, the physical presence of someone who had once moved through difficult terrain and whose body still carried the memory of it. He was perhaps seventy-six, seventy-seven. His hair was white and sparse. He wore simple trousers and a short-sleeved shirt with a small cross on the collar, no cassock, no performance of priesthood.

He rose when Joseph entered, slowly but fully, and shook his hand with both of his, the warm double handshake of South Indian greeting, which Joseph had not felt in a long time and which did something unexpected to his composure.

"*Sit*," Father Thomas said. "*The coffee is coming. The boy makes it too strong but I have stopped arguing*."

Joseph sat. The garden outside was very still. The cat had found something in the flowerbeds and was now sitting with it, satisfied.

"*Alphonsa tells me you run a community centre*," Father Thomas said.

"*Yes. In Ananda Nagar*."

"*I know Ananda Nagar. I used to go there sometimes, years ago, with the Missionaries of Charity*." He said this without elaboration, as a simple geographical fact. "*How long?"*

"*Three years now. Almost*."

"*And before?*"
"*Bhubaneswar. And before that Bangalore.*"
Father Thomas nodded slowly, as though mapping something. "*A long way from home.*"
"*Yes.*"
"*I am from Kottayam,*" Father Thomas said. "*Bangladesh felt like another planet. And yet,*" He paused, looking at the garden. "*After twenty years it felt more like home than Kottayam did. Funny thing, that. The place that costs you most becomes the place that forms you most.*"
The coffee arrived, brought by the young brother with the slightly anxious efficiency of someone trying to be unobtrusive. It was, as promised, very strong.
They drank in silence for a moment. Joseph noted that the silence was not uncomfortable. He noted this carefully, the way you note the absence of a pain you had been anticipating.

Father Thomas did not ask him why he had come. He did not ask about the priesthood, or the leaving, or the current state of his faith. He asked about the work, specifically, practically, with the interest of someone who had spent decades in similar terrain and for whom the details of a slum community centre were neither exotic nor theoretical.
He asked about the evacuation fight and listened to

the whole of it, Mitra, the injunction, the Methodist board, Caritas, the journalism of Arpita Sengupta, a reporter at a Bengali daily who had been following the Mitra case, without interrupting, asking only occasional questions that showed he understood the political geography precisely.

He asked about Bijoy. When Joseph told him the boy had been found and returned to his mother, Father Thomas closed his eyes briefly, the way people do when they receive news that could have gone the other way and they are acknowledging that fact privately.

He asked about Rajan, what Joseph saw in him, what he was trying to do. Joseph found himself explaining it more clearly than he had managed to explain it to himself: the boy's energy with nowhere legitimate to go, the way he reminded him of boys in Balajinagar, the way he reminded him, distantly and painfully, of something in himself.

Father Thomas listened to all of this. He said: "*You are good at seeing people*."

Joseph looked at him.

"*I mean it plainly*," Father Thomas said. "*Not as a compliment particularly. As an observation. You see the boy behind the anger. You saw the community behind the statistics. That is not nothing. That is, in fact, everything.*" He set down his cup. "*It is also, I*

imagine, exhausting."

"*Yes*," Joseph said. After a moment: "*Yes, it is.*"

"*Without someone to be seen by in return*," Father Thomas said, not as a question.

The garden was very quiet. The cat had gone somewhere. A bird landed on the wall and considered them briefly and left.

"*My wife …*" Joseph began, and stopped. He had not used that word before. Not aloud, not to anyone outside the journal. *My wife.* Technically incorrect in every canonical sense and entirely, precisely true.

Father Thomas waited.

"*She died a year ago*," Joseph said. "*Cholera. She was thirty-four.*"

"*I know*," Father Thomas said quietly. "*Alphonsa told me a little. I am sorry."*

The simplicity of it, *I am sorry,* without elaboration, without the theological scaffolding that people sometimes erected around death to make it more manageable, landed differently than the elaborate condolences Joseph had received in the weeks after Manju died. It landed like something true.

"*I have been …"* Joseph tried. "*I don't know how to describe what I have been. Running. Working. Keeping the centre going. Fighting Mitra. Finding Bijoy. And underneath all of it …*"

"*Holding a conversation with someone who is not*

there," Father Thomas said.

Joseph looked at him sharply.

"*I have done it myself*," the old priest said simply. "*After Bangladesh. After things I saw there that I will not describe to you on a first meeting*." A pause. "*The conversation does not stop simply because the other person is gone. It goes on. The question is whether you let it go on or whether you try to stop it because it frightens you.*"

"*I have a journal*," Joseph said. "*I started writing to her. And then* …" He stopped.

"*And then the address got larger*," Father Thomas said.

Joseph stared at him.

The old priest smiled, a slow, unhurried smile.

"*This is not unusual. This is, in fact, very old. The mystics knew it. The address gets larger. The* you *we speak to in our deepest moments, it was never only one person. It was always also something else*." He looked at Joseph steadily. "*You don't have to call it God if the word has become difficult. But you should know that what is happening to you has a very long history and you are not lost. You are, in fact, quite recognizably on a path.*"

Joseph said nothing for a long time.

Then: "*I left the priesthood. I left the Church. I lived with a woman outside of any sacramental*

framework. I have spent years unable to pray and not entirely sure I believe in the God I was ordained to serve." He said it all flatly, not as confession, not as justification, simply as the facts of the case, laid on the table. "Given all of that …"

"*Given all of that,*" Father Thomas said, "*you are sitting here. Which suggests that something in you has not finished with God, whatever you have decided about the institutional question.*" He picked up his coffee cup, found it empty, set it down. "*The institutional question is real and I am not dismissing it. But it is a different question from the one you are actually asking. And I think you know that."*

They talked for two hours. Or rather, Joseph talked, more than he had talked to anyone since Ananda, and Father Thomas listened, and occasionally said something that was not an answer but was better than an answer, a reframing, a question turned slightly on its axis, an observation that made Joseph see what he had just said from a different angle.

He did not offer solutions. He did not suggest a path back to institutional practice. He did not raise the question of regularization or canonical status or any of the administrative realities of Joseph's situation, which Joseph had been braced for and which did not come.

At one point Joseph said: "*I don't know what I believe anymore. About any of it.*"
Father Thomas said: "*That is a very good place to start."*
At another point Joseph said: "*The work feels like the only honest thing. The only thing I can do without lying to myself.*"
Father Thomas said: "*Then do the work. And pay attention to what the work is teaching you. It is teaching you something. You are already half aware of it.*"
Near the end, Joseph said, and did not entirely know why he said it, it came from somewhere below the level of intention: "*I am afraid that if I open the door again I will find nothing there*."
Father Thomas was quiet for a moment. Then he said:
"*I understand that fear. I have had it myself. I will tell you what I found, for what it is worth*." He looked at Joseph with those steady old eyes. "*I found that the nothing I was afraid of was not nothing. It was a silence I had not yet learned to sit in. And sitting in it was the work of years.*" A pause. "*But it was not nothing.*"

When Joseph rose to leave, Father Thomas walked with him to the front gate, slowly, with a stick that

Joseph had not noticed at first, the careful gait of a man navigating the distance between will and body with long practice.

At the gate he stopped.

"*Come again*," he said. "*Not to talk about God, necessarily. Come and have coffee. Tell me how the evacuation fight is going. Tell me about the boy, Rajan. Tell me what Alphonsa is doing that is making your life difficult.*" The slow smile again. "*We can talk about God when it arises naturally. It generally does.*"

Joseph looked at him. "*That's all?"*

"*That is everything*," Father Thomas said. "*Presence first. Theology can wait.*"

He patted Joseph's arm once, briefly. "*It has been waiting two thousand years. It can manage a few more weeks.*"

Joseph walked to the street. At the corner he looked back. Father Thomas was still at the gate, leaning on his stick, watching him go with the unhurried patience of someone who had learned that watching people go was also a form of accompaniment.

Joseph raised his hand.

Father Thomas raised his.

26 June.

He did not try to fix me.

I want to write that down because I was so prepared

for the fixing that its absence has left me slightly disoriented, the way you are disoriented when you brace for a step that isn't there.

He asked about the work. He asked about Bijoy and Rajan and the evacuation fight. He listened to all of it with the attention of someone for whom these things were real and mattered, not as illustrations of a spiritual point, not as the context for a pastoral intervention, just as the things themselves.

And when I told him I didn't know what I believed, he said: that is a very good place to start.

Joel used to do something similar. Not the same, Joel was younger, more ardent, he met my doubts with a kind of joyful combat, he loved the argument. Father Thomas does not argue. He simply receives. Whatever you bring, he receives it without flinching and without immediately doing something about it.

Ananda said: keep the conversation open.

Father Thomas said: presence first.

I think they are saying the same thing in different words.

I am going back on Thursday week. I told myself it was to update him on the evacuation. That is partly true. But it is not the whole truth and I am trying, in these pages, to tell the whole truth.

The whole truth is that I left that house on Rawdon Street feeling, for the first time in almost a year, that

there might be someone in this city, physically present, within reach, who can accompany me through whatever this is.

Not fix it. Not explain it. Just accompany.

I did not know how much I needed that until I found it.

Manju, I think you would have liked him. He has large hands and he makes terrible coffee and he says true things without any ceremony whatsoever. You always liked people who said true things without ceremony.

I am still here.

And tonight, for the first time in a long time, that feels like enough.

Chapter Nine
What Fathers Leave

He had known Praveen was failing since July.

Lavinia had not said it directly, she was not someone who said difficult things directly until she had carried them alone long enough to be sure they were true, but Joseph had seen it in the small adjustments she made to her day. Arriving earlier, leaving later. Checking her phone with a frequency that was not like her. Once, in the corridor, he had heard her speaking in a low urgent voice to someone, her mother, he thought, and when she turned and saw him her face did the thing faces do when they have been holding an expression for a long time and suddenly must hold a different one.

He had not pressed her. He had simply made sure she knew, without his saying so, that whatever she needed the centre could accommodate.

In early August he asked her directly. They were in the small office after the others had gone, going over the enrolment figures for the Loreto program, she had begun her first semester in the evening classes, coming back to the centre afterward with the particular energized tiredness of someone

discovering that their mind is larger than they knew.
"*Your father*," he said. "*How is he?"*
She looked at the enrolment figures. "*Not well."*
"*I would like to visit him. If that would be all right*."
She looked up then. Something moved in her face, relief, he thought, and the slight vulnerability of relief.
"*He would like that,*" she said. "*He asks about you. He asked last week whether you were managing well*."
Joseph felt this land somewhere in his chest. Praveen, failing, asking whether Joseph was managing well.
"*I will come on Saturday*," Joseph said.

The room where Praveen lay was small and carefully kept, the particular care of a poor household that has learned to make dignity from limited materials. A fan turned slowly overhead. On the wall, a framed photograph of a temple, a small cross beside it, the quiet religious negotiation of a family that had found its own way through India's complexities of faith. Lavinia's mother, Sumitra, met him at the door with the formal warmth of someone receiving a person of importance, which made Joseph feel both honoured and slightly fraudulent.
Praveen was smaller than Joseph remembered.

Illness had done what illness does, had reduced the physical man while somehow concentrating whatever was essential in him. He was sitting up against pillows, his breathing careful, his eyes when they found Joseph's still sharp and present.

"*Joseph bhai*," he said. The old honorific, the address of equals and friends.

"*Praveen*." Joseph pulled a chair close and sat. "*You are giving your family too much trouble*."

Praveen smiled, the effortful smile of someone for whom even that costs something now.

"*I have always given them trouble. At least now I have a reason*."

Sumitra brought tea and then withdrew with the tact of a woman who understood that some conversations needed their own space. Joseph could hear her in the next room, moving quietly, the small domestic sounds of a household reorganized around a sickness.

They talked for half an hour, not about the illness, not about what was coming, which they both knew was coming and which neither of them needed to name. They talked about the centre, about Lavinia's studies, about the evacuation fight and Mitra's latest legal manoeuvre, which had been defeated again, narrowly, through Arpita Sengupta's continued journalism and a petition that Rajan had helped

organize among the residents with an energy and intelligence that had surprised everyone except Joseph.

At some point Praveen said, without transition:

"*You are all right?*"

"*I am better*," Joseph said. "*Better than I was*."

"*Good*." Praveen looked at him with the directness of someone who had earned the right to directness. "*When Manju didi died I worried about you. I thought: this man will disappear. Into the work or into himself. I thought we might lose you too."*

Joseph said nothing.

"*But you stayed*," Praveen said. "*You stayed and you are still here and the centre is*." He stopped, his breath requiring attention for a moment. Then: "*She would be pleased. Whatever she is now, wherever, she would be very pleased."*

The fan turned. Outside, the street conducted its ordinary business. Joseph sat with a dying man who was telling him that Manju would be pleased, and felt something move through him that was grief and gratitude so thoroughly mixed he could not have separated them.

"*Rest*," Joseph said, after a while. "*I will come again*."

"*Yes*," Praveen said. His eyes were closing. "*Come again."*

He came again on Wednesday. Praveen was weaker, the decline in four days was visible and startling, the way decline accelerates at the end as though the body, having made its decision, sees no reason for further delay. They did not talk much. Joseph sat beside the bed and Praveen drifted in and out of sleep and once, waking, found Joseph still there and seemed satisfied by this and closed his eyes again.

Joseph sat in the plastic chair in the small room with the slowly turning fan and the photograph of the temple and the small cross and thought about what it meant to sit with someone who was leaving. He had done it before, as a priest, many times, it had been part of the work, the anointing and the prayer and the pastoral presence at the bedside. But this was different. This was not pastoral. This was simply human. One person sitting with another because the sitting mattered, because presence was the only gift left to give. It reminded him of the last moments spent with Manju.

He thought about Father Thomas saying: *presence first.*

He thought about what it meant that he had learned this, truly learned it, in the body, not in the seminary, not in the years of priesthood, but here, in this room, in this plastic chair, beside this man who had once brought him rice when Manju died and had

asked for nothing in return.
On Friday morning, before the centre opened, Lavinia called.
He knew from the first sound she made before any words came.

He closed the centre for the morning. He went to the house and sat with Sumitra and Lavinia through the first hours of it, the particular shocked stillness that follows a death that was expected and is nevertheless a shock, because expectation is never quite the same as the thing itself.
Sumitra wept with the full-bodied grief of a woman who had been holding herself together for months and could now, the waiting being over, release what she had been holding. Lavinia sat very straight and did not weep, which Joseph recognized as the composure of someone who has appointed herself responsible for everyone else's grief and is deferring her own to a later, private moment.
He did not try to fill the silence with words. He made tea, which nobody drank. He dealt with the practical things, who needed to be notified, what needed to be arranged, the small administrative machinery of death that gives the living something to do with their hands. Sister Alphonsa arrived by mid-morning, having heard from Leena, and took over the practical

machinery with her characteristic efficiency, freeing Joseph to simply be present.

At some point in the afternoon Lavinia came and sat beside him on the step outside the front door. The lane was going about its business, children, a vegetable cart, two women talking. The world entirely indifferent to the fact that Praveen was gone.

"*He told me*," Lavinia said, "*that you were a good man.*"

Joseph said nothing.

"*He said it last week. He said*: *Joseph bhai is a good man, Lavi, and you should listen to what he tells you.*"

She was looking at the lane, not at Joseph. "*He didn't give advice often. When he gave it, it meant something.*"

"*He was a good man himself*," Joseph said. "*One of the best I have known.*"

A pause. A vegetable seller called his wares from somewhere down the lane.

"*I don't know how to do this*," Lavinia said. Very quietly. As though admitting it to herself as much as to him.

"*Nobody does*," Joseph said. "*You do it anyway. One day, and then the next.*" He paused. "*And you don't do it alone. That is the important thing. You don't do it alone."*

She nodded, still looking at the lane. After a moment

she said: "*Thank you, Joseph bhai.*"
They sat on the step together in the ordinary afternoon, and Joseph thought that this, this specific thing, sitting beside someone in their grief and having nothing to offer but presence was perhaps the most honest work he had ever done.

Sumitra came to the centre the following week. She had been coming occasionally for months, helping with meals and the younger children, but now she came every day, partly, Joseph understood, because the house was unbearable in its silence, and partly because Lavinia was here and she needed to be where Lavinia was. He gave her a role that suited her, the kitchen, the meals, the thousand small physical acts of feeding people that she did with a natural warmth that the children responded to immediately.
She was a different character from her daughter, rounder, more expressive, her emotions present on her face in a way that Lavinia's never were. She had Praveen's directness without his patience. She was, Joseph observed, slightly afraid of the world on Lavinia's behalf, had been, he suspected, since Praveen's illness made it clear that the main structure of the family's security was failing.
He understood her fear. He did not dismiss it. But he

also saw what it was doing, the tightening, the watching, the questions that were not quite questions but were supervision in the language of concern.
It came to a head on a Thursday afternoon in late August.

He had seen it building for a week. Rajan and Lavinia had fallen into the easy rhythm of people who have discovered they think at similar speeds, they argued about things, cheerfully and specifically, the way young people argue when they are actually interested in each other's minds. Rajan was helping Lavinia with the enrolment paperwork for a new cohort of students; she was helping him with the written component of a skills certification program that Sunita Rao at Caritas had enrolled him in. They sat at adjacent tables in the main room and worked and talked and occasionally laughed at things that were apparently not visible to anyone else in the room.
It was entirely unremarkable and clearly worrying Sumitra considerably.
Joseph watched Sumitra watching them for two days before he said anything. He chose his moment, a quiet afternoon, the centre mostly empty, Sumitra washing cups in the kitchen area with the focused

energy of someone working through something in their mind.
He picked up a cloth and began drying.
She looked at him sideways. "*You don't need to do that.*"
"*I know,*" he said.
They washed and dried in silence for a moment.
"*She is young,*" Sumitra said, eventually. To the cups, not to Joseph.
"*She is,"* Joseph said.
"*And he is …"* She stopped.
"*He is a good young man,"* Joseph said. "*He has had a difficult path and he is finding his way. He is finding it here, which is why he is here.*" He set down a cup. "*Lavinia is also finding her way. She is studying. She is working. She is becoming someone remarkable, which you already know because you are her mother and you have always known it.*"
Sumitra said nothing, but her hands slowed slightly.
"*What she needs from you right now,*" Joseph said carefully, "*is not rules. She is not a child and she knows the difference between right and wrong; you and Praveen made sure of that.*" He paused. "*What she needs is to know that you are there. That you see her. That whatever she brings to you, you will receive it without the conversation already being over before it begins.*"

A long silence. The fan. The distant sound of children in the lane.
"*I am afraid*," Sumitra said. Very simply.
"*I know*," Joseph said. "*That is not wrong. Fear for your child is not wrong. But she can feel the fear and it makes her smaller. And she should not be smaller. She should be expanding into who she is becoming*."
He picked up another cup. "*Trust her. And let her see you trusting her. That is the greatest thing you can give her now.*"
Sumitra wiped her eyes quickly, with the back of her wrist, and resumed washing with restored vigour, as though the weeping had not happened. Joseph dried cups and said nothing more and thought that Praveen would have recognized this conversation and been glad of it.

He told Father Thomas all of it on a Thursday morning in September, in the sitting room on Rawdon Street with the strong coffee and the garden where the cat had become a reliable presence. He had been coming every two weeks now, sometimes with specific things to say, sometimes simply to sit in the particular quality of that room, which had acquired for him the character of a place where honesty was the natural register.
He told Father Thomas about Praveen's death, about

sitting beside the bed, about Lavinia on the step. About Sumitra and the cups. About watching Rajan and Lavinia at adjacent tables arguing cheerfully about enrolment forms.

Father Thomas listened to all of it with his habitual unhurried attention. When Joseph finished there was a comfortable silence, the kind of silence that had developed between them over the weeks, that no longer needed to be filled.

"*You are describing a family*," Father Thomas said.

Joseph looked at him.

"*Not in the legal sense. Not in the biological sense. But in the functional and emotional sense; you are describing a family that has formed around you and that you are tending.*" He looked at Joseph steadily. "*Does that frighten you?"*

Joseph considered this honestly.

"*No*," he said. "That is what surprises me. It doesn't frighten me. It feels … it feels like the most real thing in my life."

"*Good*," Father Thomas said. "*Hold that. Don't explain it, don't qualify it, don't immediately ask what it means theologically. Just hold it as what it is.*"

He picked up his cup.

"*You have been given something, Joseph. Not what you planned. Not what you might have chosen, if you had been offered a menu at thirty. But something real*

and something ..." he paused, choosing carefully, "*something that is asking something of you in return. The asking is the gift. Do you understand what I mean?"*

Joseph thought about it. "*The responsibility is the gift.*"

"*Yes. Exactly that.*" Father Thomas nodded slowly. "*A man with nothing to tend becomes thin. You have been given people to tend. Lavinia and her mother. The boy Rajan. The community. This is not a consolation prize for the life you didn't have. This is a life.*"

Walking back from Rawdon Street that afternoon Joseph took the long way, through the park, which he rarely did; he was not normally a person who took the long way, time being always a thing in short supply. But the afternoon was, for once, not pressing, and something Father Thomas had said was still moving through him and needed space.

This is a life.

He had spent a year, longer, if he was honest, much longer, treating his life as a temporary condition. As something that had happened to him after the real life, the intended life, had ended. The priesthood ended. Manju died. And what remained was, aftermath. Management. Keeping things going until

something clarified.

He had not noticed, or had refused to notice, that something had been clarifying all along.

He sat on a bench in the park. Around him the ordinary afternoon: a woman with a child, two old men playing chess, a boy on a bicycle making the same circuit repeatedly for the pure pleasure of motion.

He thought about Praveen saying: *she would be very pleased.*

He thought about Lavinia on the step: *I don't know how to do this.*

He thought about Rajan at the adjacent table, arguing about enrolment forms with the focused energy of someone who has found, finally, something worth arguing about.

He thought about Sumitra drying her eyes with the back of her wrist and returning to the washing.

He thought about Sister Alphonsa, arriving the morning of Praveen's death without being called, because she knew.

He thought about Leena on Tuesday and Thursday, precise and present, carrying her own grief alongside the work without complaint.

He thought about Father Thomas with his stick and his terrible coffee and his capacity for silence.

He thought about Ananda at the gate in

Secunderabad, raising her hand.

He thought about Manju's handwriting in the address book. *Knows everyone. Trustworthy. Call directly.*

He sat in the park in the ordinary afternoon and felt, moving through him, something that he recognized distantly as the sensation he had known in the early years of the seminary, before the institution had thickened around it, before the roles had accumulated, the sensation of being, simply, in the right place. Not perfectly. Not without pain or confusion or the ongoing uncertainty about everything that mattered. But *in* it. Present. Here.

He did not know what to call it.

He thought: I do not need to call it anything tonight.

He got up from the bench and walked back to Ananda Nagar, where there was work to do and people waiting and a life, it turned out, that was already his.

4 September.

Father Thomas said: this is a life.

I have been turning that over all afternoon. Such a simple thing to say. Such a difficult thing to receive.

Praveen is gone. I keep reaching for the fact of him and finding the absence, the way you reach for something on a shelf where it has always been and

your hand finds air. He was one of the last people who knew Manju and me together, who saw us as we actually were, not the story people tell afterward, not the grief, but the daily living of it, the arguments and the silences and the meals and the work. He saw all of that and he stayed. He brought rice. He asked for nothing.

I miss him in the specific way you miss people who required nothing of you. Those people are rarer than the ones who love you.

Lavinia is finding her way. She is studying and working and beginning, I think, to understand that the world is larger than the fear her parents carried about it, not because the fear was wrong, it was never wrong, it was love in the form available to them, but because she is ready now for a larger world. I am trying to make sure she knows the door is open.

Rajan came early this morning and fixed the broken hinge on the storage room door without being asked. He has started doing this, noticing what needs doing and doing it. It is a small thing. It is not a small thing. Manju, I think this is what you were building. Not the building itself, not the programs, not the enrolment numbers. This. These specific people in this specific place, finding their way toward each other and toward something larger than themselves.

I think I am beginning to understand that I am not the

builder. I am part of what is being built.
Father Thomas says: hold it. Don't explain it. Just hold it.
All right.
I am holding it.
I am still here. And tonight, that is not just endurance. Tonight it is something closer to gratitude.

Chapter Ten
What the Ground Holds

The compromise came on a Tuesday in October, which Joseph had long since stopped being surprised by. Tuesdays, he had concluded, were simply the day the city chose to deliver its verdicts.

It came in the form of a phone call from Debashish Roy, the lawyer who had been working the case through the Caritas connection for the past several months. Roy's voice had the careful flatness of someone delivering news that is neither good nor bad in any simple sense and who has learned, across a career of such calls, that the careful flatness is the most honest register available.

The Municipal Corporation had issued its final modified order. The development would proceed on a reduced footprint — the northern section of the designated area, bounded by the survey markers that had been placed and replaced and contested for the better part of a year. The community centre and the central lanes of Ananda Nagar fell outside the revised boundary. They were safe.

The northern section was not.

"*How many families*?" Joseph said.

A pause. "*The corporation's figure is eighty-seven registered households. The actual number is higher. Our estimate is closer to one hundred and ten, one hundred and fifteen.*"

Joseph sat down. He was in the small back office, the accounts folder open on the desk in front of him, Manju's photograph on the wall, the children squinting into the sun. Some of those children were from the northern lanes.

"*The relocation package?*" he said.

"*Schedule VII. Standard.*" Roy's voice said everything that needed to be said about Schedule VII standard relocation packages without saying any of it.

"*When do they move?"*

"*The order gives sixty days. But Mitra's contractors are already …, there has been preliminary activity at the boundary since yesterday.*"

Of course there had been. The paperwork catching up to what had already been decided.

"*Thank you, Debashish*," Joseph said.

He put the phone down. He sat in the office for a long time, looking at the photograph, doing the arithmetic he did not want to do. One hundred and ten families. Perhaps five hundred and fifteen, five hundred people. Each family a specific arrangement of lives and objects and histories accumulated in a place

that would cease to exist in sixty days.

He knew their names. That was the thing. He had spent a year among them, drinking their tea, filing their paperwork, sitting in their doorways. He knew the names of the northern lane families the way he knew the centre of Ananda Nagar, not as a list but as a community, a living thing with its own internal way.

He picked up his pen. He opened the journal, not the practical notebook. He wrote one line.

We saved the centre and lost the northern lanes and I don't know yet what to do with that.

Then he closed it and went to tell Sister Alphonsa.

She received the news in silence. She had the capacity, which Joseph had come to rely on without ever quite acknowledging, for receiving difficult things without immediately doing something about them, for letting the weight of a thing be its actual weight before the practical response began.

After a moment she said: "*Champa*."

"*Yes*," Joseph said. "*Champa is in the northern sectio*n."

Bijoy's mother. Who had come to the centre door when her son disappeared and stood there with the particular dignity of someone asking for something they felt they had no right to ask for. Who had

received her son back and had never stopped being grateful in the specific, undemonstrative way of someone for whom gratitude was not a performance but a private fact.

"*And the Ansari family*," Sister Alphonsa said. "*And old Hariprasad. And the widow, what is her name …*"

"*Meenakshi,*" Joseph said.

"*Meenakshi.*" She folded her hands in her lap. "*All right. We have sixty days. What do we do with sixty days?"*

This was Sister Alphonsa's form of grief, not the grief itself, visible, but the immediate turn toward what could still be done. Joseph had learned to read it. He did not mistake the practicality for the absence of feeling.

"*We help them*," he said. "*Every family in the northern section, we go through the relocation process with them, family by family. Schedule VII is inadequate but there are supplementary programs, NGO support, things we can do to make the inadequate package less inadequate. Sunita can help. Caritas has done this before*."

"*And after they are gone?"*

"*After they are gone*," Joseph said, "*we make sure they know where the centre is. That the door is still open. That Ananda Nagar did not forget them simply because Mitra moved a boundary*."

Sister Alphonsa nodded slowly. Then she stood, smoothing her sari, and said:
"*I will start the list this afternoon.*"

He told the community that evening. He had asked Shyamal to spread the word: a meeting at the centre, seven o'clock, everyone who could come. They came: the centre families and the northern lane families together, perhaps two hundred people crowding the main room and spilling into the courtyard, the corridor, the street outside the open windows.

He stood at the front and told them the truth. The whole of it, without softening, the reduced footprint, the boundary, the number of families affected, the timeline. He told them what the centre would do in the sixty days. He told them what the relocation package provided and where it fell short and what they could do to supplement it.

He did not tell them it was all right. It was not all right. He had learned, across this year, that telling people their pain was all right was a form of abandonment dressed as comfort.

When he finished there was a silence of the kind that follows news that has been feared and is now confirmed, not shock, because they had known this was possible, but the specific heaviness of possibility becoming fact.

Then a woman from the northern lanes, he knew her, her name was Fatima, she had three children, her husband drove an auto-rickshaw, said:

"*You fought for us.*"

"*Yes,*" Joseph said.

"*You could not win everything.*"

"*No. I could not.*"

She nodded. Not forgiving him, exactly, there was nothing to forgive, which was itself a kind of grace. Simply acknowledging the reality of it.

"*Then we go,*" she said. "*And we take what help you can give us. And we go.*"

The room was quiet for a moment. Then Shyamal began to speak about the practical arrangements, and Rajan moved to the side table where the relocation paperwork was already laid out, and the meeting became the thing that meetings must eventually become, the next step, and the next step after that.

Joseph stood at the front and watched his community organize itself around an imperfect outcome and thought that this, too, was something Manju had known and he was only now learning: that people are more resilient than the structures built to protect them, and that community is what survives when everything else is taken.

He saw Mitra on a Wednesday morning in November. He had not planned to. He was walking back from the northern boundary where he had spent the morning with Sunita Rao and a Caritas legal volunteer, going through relocation documents with three families whose paperwork had complications. The contractors had been working for two weeks now, the survey markers were gone, replaced by temporary fencing, and behind the fencing the first structures were already coming down. The sound of it carried through the lanes. You could not not hear it.

He was passing the boundary when a black car pulled up and Rajan Mitra got out.

Joseph had seen photographs but not the man. He was perhaps fifty-five, well-built, in a dark suit that was slightly too formal for a construction site, with the groomed confidence of someone for whom the world has arranged itself satisfactorily for a long time. He was accompanied by two men with clipboards and a third whose function was not immediately obvious.

He did not see Joseph. Or if he saw him, he registered him as one of the many people in the lane and moved on toward the fencing, where a contractor was waiting, where a brief conversation was conducted, where documents were examined and

something was signed.
Then he got back into the car.
It pulled away into the traffic and was gone.
The whole thing had taken perhaps four minutes. No drama. No confrontation. No moment in which the human cost of the transaction was visible on his face, because why would it be, the human cost was not his cost, had never been his cost, was the cost borne by the five or six hundred people currently organizing their lives into two bags.
Joseph stood in the lane and watched the car disappear and felt something that was not quite rage and not quite despair but contained elements of both, the specific exhaustion of understanding that the world operates, mostly, through transactions conducted by men in good suits who sign documents at construction sites and drive away, and that justice, when it comes, comes slowly and partially and never quite in the form you needed it to take.
He stood there for a moment. Then he turned and walked back into Ananda Nagar, where there was work to do.

The hardest day was the day Champa left.
She had come to him the week before to go through her relocation documents, she was being moved to a resettlement colony in the eastern suburbs, forty

minutes by bus from Ananda Nagar, from the garment factory, from the community she had lived in for twelve years. The documents were in order. The package was what it was. He had helped her apply for a supplementary grant through Caritas that would cover three months of transport costs to the factory while she found her footing.

She had sat across the desk from him, Bijoy beside her, and gone through the papers with the focused attention of someone determined to understand what was happening to them. Bijoy, beside her, had said very little. He was a year older than when he had first disappeared. There was something in his face that had not been there before, a wariness, a knowledge. He was nine years old and he had knowledge in his face that nine-year-olds should not have.

On the morning she left, Joseph went to the northern lanes.

The moving was a quiet affair, a hired tempo, a small group of neighbours helping carry things, the objects of a life emerging from a doorway and being arranged in the vehicle with care. Champa saw him and came over and he did not know what to say, and apparently, she did not require him to say anything, she took his hand briefly, both of hers around one of his, the same gesture Father Thomas had used at

the gate on Rawdon Street, and then she went back to directing the loading of the tempo.
Bijoy, passing with a box, stopped in front of Joseph.
"*Will you still be here?"* he said. "*At the centre?"*
"*Yes*," Joseph said. "*The centre is still here. You can come. Whenever you can come, you come*."
Bijoy nodded, considering this seriously. Then he carried his box to the tempo.
Joseph watched the vehicle until it turned the corner and was gone. Then he stood in the lane outside the empty house, door open, interior visible, the marks on the wall where things had hung, the particular nakedness of a room that has been lived in and vacated, and allowed himself to feel, without management or mitigation, the full weight of what had been lost.
He stood there for a long time.
Then he walked back to the centre, where sixty families were still, and a school was still running, and Lavinia was teaching and Rajan was organizing and Leena was coming on Tuesday and Sister Alphonsa was going through the accounts with her pencil, and all of it, diminished, imperfect, real, was still here.

12 November.
The northern lanes are gone. Not all at once, it has

been happening slowly, family by family, house by house, over six weeks. Watching a community dismantle itself is a different thing from watching a building come down. It takes longer. It is quieter. The violence of it is distributed across many small mornings.

One hundred and eight families in the end. The corporation's figure was, as expected, an undercount.

I have been thinking about what it means to accept an imperfect outcome. Not to be at peace with it; I am not at peace with it and I don't think peace is the right response. One hundred and eight families should not produce peace. But to accept it in the sense of: this is what happened, this is what the world produced from our best efforts, and the question now is what we do with what remains.

Father Thomas said something last week that I have been carrying. He said: the tradition you come from has a word for this. It calls it the paschal mystery, the pattern of loss and continuation that runs through everything. He said it not as theology but as observation. As a description of what is actually happening.

I did not argue with it. I am not sure I believe it in the doctrinal sense. But I recognize the pattern. I have been living inside it for years.

Something was lost. Something continues. The

continuation does not cancel the loss. The loss does not cancel the continuation. Both are true simultaneously and the living of that simultaneity is, perhaps, what faithfulness looks like when it has been stripped of certainty.

I saw Mitra. Four minutes. A signature. A car driving away.

I stood in the lane afterward and I did not scream and I did not break anything, which I mention because earlier this year I might have done one or both. I stood in the lane and felt what there was to feel and then I walked back to the centre.

That is not nothing. I think that is not nothing.

Champa left on a Tuesday. Of course she did.

Bijoy asked me if I would still be here. I told him yes. That is the promise I can make. Not justice, not perfect outcomes, not a world that arranges itself fairly. Just: I will still be here. The door will still be open.

I think that might be enough to build on.

I think, and I am saying this carefully, without forcing it, I think that is what You have been asking of me all along. Not triumph. Not certainty. Just presence. Just the open door.

I am beginning to understand.

December came and with it the cool that passes for winter in Calcutta, not cold exactly, but a gentling of

the air, a quality of light in the mornings that was almost northern, almost restrained. The centre settled into its new shape, smaller in its catchment area, quieter at the edges, but somehow more itself than it had been in the months of crisis. As though the fighting had been necessary and the resolution, imperfect as it was, had allowed something to breathe.

Rajan had taken on a formal role, Joseph had given it a title, *community liaison,* which Rajan had received with an expression of careful dignity that suggested the title mattered to him more than he would admit. He moved through Ananda Nagar with the ease of someone who had grown up in its lanes and was now, for the first time, moving through them with a purpose that was his own rather than borrowed from someone else's agenda. Joseph watched this and thought of what Father Thomas had said: *the place that costs you most becomes the place that forms you most.*

Lavinia's first semester at Loreto was going well, she had said this briefly, factually, in the way she reported good things, as though they required less ceremony than difficulties. But Joseph had seen her, one evening after her class, sitting at the table in the centre with her notes spread around her, absorbed in something she was reading, and the quality of that

absorption, the fullness of it, the sense of someone fully inhabiting their own mind, had filled him with a satisfaction he recognized, now, as paternal in the deepest sense. Not possession. Not pride exactly. Something quieter. The pleasure of watching someone become.

Sumitra fed people. This had become, simply, her vocation, the kitchen, the meals, the physical act of nourishment that she performed with a warmth that was its own form of ministry. She worried less, or worried differently. She watched Lavinia and Rajan with the eyes of a woman who was learning, slowly, to trust what she saw.

Leena came on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They had found, across the months, a working rhythm that had become also a friendship, not the friendship they might have had if Manju had lived, which would have been triangular and different, but a friendship built on the specific foundation of shared loss and shared work, which has its own solidity. They did not speak of Manju often. When they did it was without the protective wrapping that grief usually requires, directly, with the ease of two people who have decided that her name is safe between them.

Sister Alphonsa went through the accounts every Tuesday with her pencil and her small precise margin marks and her absolute refusal to pretend

that numbers meant anything other than what they meant, which Joseph had come to regard as one of the most spiritual practices he had ever witnessed. The centre was diminished and it was alive and it was, in ways Joseph was only beginning to count, more genuinely itself than it had ever been.

He went to see Father Thomas on the last Thursday of November and told him all of it, the compromise, the one hundred and eight families, Champa leaving, Mitra in the lane, the tempo turning the corner. Father Thomas listened to the whole of it without interrupting. Then he said:

"*How are you*?"

Not: how did you handle it. Not: what did you learn. Simply: how are you.

"*Tired*," Joseph said. "*Sad about the families. Glad about what survived.*" He paused. "*Both of those things at the same time, which I used to find impossible and am now finding, not easy, but possible.*"

"*That is growth*," Father Thomas said. "*Unfashionable word. But accurate.*"

"*I saw Mitra*," Joseph said. "*Four minutes. A signature. He drove away.*"

Father Thomas nodded. "*And you wanted…*"

"*I don't know what I wanted. Justice, I suppose. Some*

acknowledgment. Some moment in which he had to see what his transaction cost." Joseph looked at his hands. "*It didn't come.*"

"*It rarely does,*" Father Thomas said. "*Not in this life, not in any form we can verify.*" He was quiet for a moment. "*What did you do?"*

"*I stood in the lane. I felt what there was to feel. And then I walked back to the centre.*"

Father Thomas looked at him for a long moment. "*Joseph,*" he said. "*Do you understand what you just described?*"

Joseph looked at him.

"*You stood in the lane with the full weight of an unjust outcome and you did not collapse and you did not rage and you did not disappear into the work to avoid feeling it. You felt it. And then you went back.*" He paused. "*That is not a small thing. For the man who came to me in June, that is not a small thing at all.*"

Joseph said nothing. Outside, the garden. The cat in its usual place. The afternoon light coming through the window at its December angle, lower and softer than he remembered it.

"*I wrote something in the journal,*" he said. "*About the paschal mystery. What you said last week.*"

"*Yes*?"

"*I said I wasn't sure I believed it in the doctrinal sense.*" He paused. "*But I said I recognized the*

pattern. That I had been living inside it."

Father Thomas smiled, the slow, unhurried smile. "*That*," he said, "*is a very good place to be. Recognizing the pattern without needing to systematize it.*"

He set down his cup.

"*Doctrine is the map. You have been living in the territory. Eventually, not yet, in your own time, the map and the territory may find each other again. Or they may not, in any conventional sense. But the territory is real. What you have been living is real.*" He looked at Joseph steadily. "*Don't let anyone tell you otherwise*."

Chapter Eleven
Ordinary Light

It was a Friday in December when it happened, which was not a Tuesday and carried no particular weight of significance, and Joseph would think afterward that this was perhaps the most important thing about it, that it happened on an ordinary day, in ordinary light, without announcing itself.

The school day was ending. The last group of the afternoon, the younger children, six- and seven-year-old, Lavinia's group, was in the slow, pleasurable process of not quite finishing. This was a daily phenomenon that Joseph had observed with increasing affection across the months: the way children at the end of a school day inhabit a transitional state, neither fully in the lesson nor fully released from it, drifting between the two with the unhurried freedom of people for whom time has not yet become a pressure.

Lavinia was at the board, wiping it down with the particular care she brought to everything, thorough, unhurried, leaving it clean for Monday. Two girls were still at their table, heads together over something that was clearly not schoolwork and was

clearly of great importance. A boy named Suresh was attempting, with complete seriousness, to balance a pencil on his upper lip. Three others were at the window, watching something in the lane below with the focused attention that children bring to the inexplicable doings of the adult world.
Joseph had come in to leave some papers on Lavinia's desk. He had not intended to stay.
He stayed.
He sat down in the chair beside the door, the low chair that was intended for parents waiting to speak with the teacher, and set the papers on his knee and watched the room complete its afternoon, and something in him that had been held at a particular tension for a very long time became, quietly and without drama, slightly less tense.

He thought of Manju.
This was not unusual, he thought of her many times each day, had done since she died, would do, he understood now, for the rest of his life. What was unusual was the quality of the thinking. It arrived without the laceration that had accompanied it for so long, that specific interior flinching, as though the thought of her were a wound being touched. It was still grief. He did not mistake it for anything other than grief. But it was grief that had, somewhere in

the long months, changed its character, less like an open wound, more like a scar that aches in certain moments and is also simply part of the body now, part of the lived surface of a life.

He thought of her watching this room. He thought of the particular quality of attention she would have brought to it, the way she would have seen each child individually, not as a group, would have known which one was having a difficult week at home, which one was on the edge of something opening in their mind, which one needed to be called on and which one needed to be left alone today. She had had that gift completely and he had it partially and Lavinia, he thought, was developing it in her own form, quieter than Manju's, more patient, less immediately instinctive but perhaps more durable for being learned rather than simply given.

He thought: she is still here in what she made possible.

He thought this without reaching for it, without constructing it as consolation. It was simply true, in the way that certain things become simply true after enough time and enough living, not comforting truths, not easy ones, but true in the way that a fact of geography is true: the land is arranged this way, the river runs here, this is what is.

Suresh had abandoned the pencil experiment and was now engaged in something involving a piece of string and the leg of his chair, the logic of which was not visible from where Joseph sat but was clearly absorbing. The two girls had reached some conclusion in their private conference and separated with the satisfied air of people who have settled an important matter. One of the boys at the window said something and the other two laughed, briefly, the transparent laughter of children that carries no weight and asks for nothing.

Lavinia finished the board and turned and saw Joseph and did not seem surprised to find him there. She had acquired, across the months, a comfort with his presence that was one of the quiet markers of what had grown between them, not needing to account for him, not performing anything for him, simply continuing to be herself in his vicinity.

"*Papers?*" she said, nodding at his knee.

"*For Monday. The enrolment applications. Three new families.*"

She took them and set them on her desk and began organizing the day's materials into the order she kept them, neat, logical, the system she had developed herself and which worked. Joseph watched her and thought of Praveen, who had wanted a secure future for his daughter and had perhaps imagined it

differently but had trusted Joseph with it nonetheless. He thought of sitting beside Praveen's bed, of the slowly turning fan, of *she would be very pleased.*

He thought: Praveen, she is becoming remarkable. You would see it. You would not make a fuss of it because you were not a man who made fusses, but you would see it and you would be satisfied and that satisfaction would have been, for you, a complete and sufficient thing.

The thought arrived and settled and did not require anything of him.

The children left in ones and twos, collected by mothers or older siblings, drifting out through the door with the end-of-week looseness of people released into two days of their own time. Suresh left last, the string still in his hand, still apparently working through the logic of whatever he had been attempting, his mind elsewhere as his feet carried him out the door.

The room was quiet.

The late afternoon light came through the windows at its December angle, low, slightly golden, the particular light of the season that falls across things without insisting on them, that illuminates without overstatement. It lay across the empty tables, the

clean board, the small chairs arranged in their rows. It lay across the papers on Lavinia's desk. It lay across Joseph's hands, folded in his lap in the old way, the way they still folded themselves without his permission, the muscle memory of thirty years.

He looked at his hands.

He thought: these hands do not know what they are anymore. They were ordained hands, set apart, anointed. Then they were hands that built something with a woman he loved, that held her when she was sick, that could not, could not, he had not been able to stop what was happening. Then they were hands that filed paperwork and wrote in a journal and knocked on doors and made tea for sixty displaced people and sat with a dying man and fixed nothing and were present anyway.

He thought: perhaps that is what hands are for. Not the fixing. The presence.

He thought this without bitterness. That was the thing he noticed, the absence of bitterness, which had been present for so long that its absence felt like a change in the weather, like stepping from one room into another and finding the air different.

Joel came to him, as Joel sometimes did now, not the grief of Joel, not the old guilt of the survivor, but Joel himself, the man, the way he had been: the

particular combination of intellectual rigor and simple joy that had made him unlike anyone else Joseph had known. Joel who had prayed with the naturalness of breathing. Joel who had argued with Joseph about everything and been right about most of it and gracious about being right, which was rarer than being right.

He thought: Joel, look at what became of the boy you saw going to Balajinagar. Look at what the years made of him. I don't think it is what either of us expected. I don't think it is what you would have planned, if you had been given the planning of it. But I think, I think you would recognize it. I think you would find it, in its crooked way, sufficient.

He thought of Ananda at the gate in Secunderabad, raising her hand. Of her voice: *keeping the conversation open is all prayer ever was.* Of the way she had received the news of everything he had become and everything he had lost with those steady dark eyes that required nothing of him except honesty.

He thought of Father Thomas with his stick and his strong coffee and his absolute refusal to fix anything, which had turned out to be the most fixing thing anyone had done for him in years. Of Father Thomas saying: *the map and the territory may find each other again. In your own time.*

He thought: perhaps they already are. Quietly, without ceremony. The way most real things happen.

Lavinia had gone, he had heard her leave, a soft word of goodbye, the door closing with the gentleness she brought to everything. The centre was quiet around him. He could hear, distantly, Rajan in the storeroom, some task being attended to with the steady, purposeful sound of someone who has found his place in a thing and inhabits it. He could hear Sumitra in the kitchen, the small domestic sounds that had become, over the months, as natural a part of the centre's texture as the creak of the ceiling fan or the particular quality of light through the eastern window in the mornings.

Sister Alphonsa would have gone home, she left at five, always, with the discipline of someone who understood that a life given entirely to work without rest was not generosity but a slow destruction. He thought of her sitting with him in the office, pencil in hand, going through numbers with her absolute refusal to pretend they meant anything other than what they meant. He thought of her saying, on the night of the riot, simply: *you are doing well.* Three words. Everything necessary.

Leena he would see on Tuesday. They had fallen into the rhythm of it, Tuesday, Thursday, and the

occasional Saturday when something specific required an extra pair of hands. They had developed a friendship based on their common loss, deeply felt but about which they would not speak. On Tuesday she would arrive with her bag and her precise competence and they would work side by side and occasionally say something true to each other and that would be enough.

He thought of Rajan fixing the hinge without being asked. He thought of Bijoy on the step of the tempo, carrying his box, asking: *will you still be here?* He thought of Champa's hands around his, briefly, before she turned back to the loading.

He thought of Shyamal and Tapan, of Arpita Sengupta who had kept writing until the injunction held, of Sunita Rao at Caritas who had answered his calls at any hour without complaint, of Debashish Roy who had delivered imperfect news in the most honest register available.

He thought of all of them, the living and the dead, the present and the absent, and understood that they were not a catalogue of loss. They were not the record of what the years had taken. They were what the years had given. Each one of them, in their specific irreplaceable particularity, a gift he had not known how to receive at the time and was only now, in this quiet room in this ordinary light, beginning to

properly unwrap.

He thought of God.

He did this carefully, the way you approach something that has startled you before, not with the old confidence, which was gone and was not coming back and whose going, he could now see, had perhaps been necessary. Not with the rage of the window, which had also been necessary, which had been, Father Thomas was right, the most honest prayer he had managed in years. Not with the cautious theological manoeuvring he had performed for months, approaching the question sideways, through the journal, through the work, through the careful indirection of a man who has been burned and is not ready to touch the flame again.

He thought of God directly. Plainly. The way he was sitting in this room, without performance, without the professional apparatus of belief, without anything except what he actually had, which was this: a man in a chair, in ordinary light, at the end of an ordinary day, who was still here.

He did not know what he believed, precisely. He was not sure that precision was the point. What he knew was this: that across two years of grief and rage and confusion and mistakes and partial victories and real losses, something had continued. Not in him, or

not only in him. Something larger. The work continuing. The people continuing. The door staying open. The conversation, Ananda's word, remaining open, even in the months when he had been certain it was closed.

He thought: if that is You, I do not fully understand You. I am not sure I trust You, in the uncomplicated way I once thought I did. I am not sure I can say the creed without hesitation. I am not sure of any of the things I was once very sure of.

But I am still here. And I am still, this surprised him, even now, I am still talking to You. After everything. Still talking.

He thought: perhaps that is where we begin again. Not where we left off. Somewhere new, somewhere humbler, somewhere without the institutional furniture and the professional certainty and the careful management of faith as a performance. Somewhere more like this room, in this light, with these hands, which do not know exactly what they are anymore but are here, and open, and willing.

He sat with that for a long time. “After all of that”, he said, “only one word I can add: Thank you”.

Outside, the lane was doing what the lane did at the end of a December day in Ananda Nagar, filling with the small sounds of people returning, of cooking

beginning, of children released from the afternoon into the early evening, of a city settling into its vast and various life. Ordinary sounds. The sounds of a place that existed, that had survived, that was diminished and alive and continuing.

He did not know how long he sat there. Long enough that the light shifted from its golden December angle to something softer and lower, the last of the afternoon becoming the first of the evening, the transition so gradual that he could not have said when one became the other.

At some point Rajan appeared in the doorway, on his way out, and saw Joseph in the low chair and said nothing, just raised his chin in the brief acknowledgment of one man to another, and Joseph raised his hand slightly in return, and Rajan went, and the sound of his footsteps diminished down the corridor and out through the front door.

Joseph sat in the quiet.

He thought: I have been asked, across two years, to accept imperfection. Imperfection in outcomes, the northern lanes, the one hundred and eight families, the partial victory that was also a real loss. Imperfection in myself, the mistakes, the battles lost, the things I could not be for people who needed me to be them. Imperfection in faith, the inability to

return to what I was, the necessity of finding something different, something humbler, something without the clean edges I once found comfort in.
He thought: perhaps imperfection is not the problem to be solved. Perhaps it is the condition inside which everything real happens.
He thought of the children this afternoon, Suresh with his string, the two girls with their important conference, the three at the window watching the inexplicable adult world. Their lives would be imperfect. The world they were being prepared for was imperfect, would fail them in ways he could not predict and could not entirely prevent, would offer them beauty and loss in the unpredictable mixture that the world offers everyone. What he could give them was not protection from that. What he could give them was this: a room, a door that said *All Are Welcome* and meant it, a presence that showed up on ordinary days and stayed.
It was not enough. It was what there was. It would have to be enough.

He stood, eventually. His back protested, the low chair, the long sitting. He straightened slowly, the way he had noticed himself moving more carefully in recent months, the body beginning to make its own small negotiations with time.

He picked up his jacket from the back of the chair. He looked at the room, the empty tables, the clean board, the small chairs in their rows, the papers on Lavinia's desk, the photograph on the wall that Manju had put there: twenty children squinting into the sun. Some of those children were from the northern lanes and were gone now. Others were still here. New ones had come. The photograph was incomplete, as all photographs are, a moment held, the rest of time moving on around it.

He looked at it for a moment. Then he turned off the light and went out into the corridor.

The evening was mild, the December air doing its gentle work on the city. He stood outside the centre for a moment before locking up, a habit he had developed without noticing, this pause at the end of the day, this brief standing in the lane before the walk home.

The lane was alive with its evening self. A woman with a basket. Two men talking at the corner with the unhurried ease of people who have earned the end of the day. A child running, for no reason, simply running, the pure motion of it, legs and arms and the pleasure of moving fast through the cooling air. A smell of cooking from three directions. The one streetlight coming on, its amber glow beginning to be useful as the sky darkened by degrees.

Joseph stood in the lane and looked at all of it.

He felt, moving through him, something that arrived without announcement and without explanation, something he did not reach for and did not manufacture and could not have produced by effort or intention. It was quiet and it was specific and it was, he searched for the word and found it and found that he was not afraid of it, it was gratitude.

Not for everything. Not a gratitude that erased the northern lanes or brought back the dead or resolved the questions that remained, as they would remain, unresolved. Not a gratitude that required him to pretend the world was other than it was.

A gratitude for this. For the lane in the December evening. For the child running. For the smell of cooking and the amber streetlight and the two men talking at the corner. For Suresh and his string and Lavinia and her careful board and Rajan's chin raised in the doorway. For Sister Alphonsa's pencil and Leena's Tuesday and Father Thomas's terrible coffee and Ananda's hand at the gate. For Praveen who had asked whether Joseph was managing well, from a sickbed, asking about someone else. For Manju, always Manju, whose handwriting was still in the address book and whose name still opened doors and whose absence was a permanent wound that was also, in some way he could not explain and

would not try to explain, a permanent presence.
For the fact of being here. Still here. On an ordinary evening in an ordinary lane in a city that was vast and indifferent and also, he knew this now, had learned it slowly and at great cost, also capable of this: this specific light, these specific people, this specific and unrepeatable moment in which a man stood outside a community centre that had survived and felt, without knowing entirely why, that it was enough.
That it was, in fact, more than enough.
That it was, the word arrived quietly, without drama, without any of the theological apparatus he had once needed to surround it, that it was grace.

He locked the door.
He put the key in his pocket.
He walked home through the December evening, through the lane that was alive with its ordinary life, and the light was ordinary and the sounds were ordinary and he was, for the first time in a very long time, exactly where he was, not behind glass, not at a remove, not managing his presence from a careful interior distance.
Present. Simply, fully, imperfectly present.
The lane curved ahead of him. He followed it.

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Back-cover blurb

Manju is gone. Joseph remains. Around him, Balajinagar continues its relentless, beautiful, exhausting life — children at risk, a community under threat, a riot that no one wanted and everyone saw coming. In the ruins of grief, Joseph discovers that fidelity is not a feeling but a practice, renewed each morning in small, ordinary acts. The final novel of the Calcutta Trilogy ends not with resolution, but with grace — quiet, unannounced, and enough.

The Calcutta Trilogy follows Joseph Tiruvalli, a man of the slums, not a hero by any conventional measure — across three novels that trace the full arc of a life lived in Balajinagar (Bhubaneshwar) and Ananda Nagar, one of Kolkata's most forgotten corners. From the charged nights of a community finding its voice, through the fragile dawn of new relationships and new purpose, to the long, quiet aftermath of grief and spiritual renewal, the trilogy asks what it means to remain faithful — to people, to God, to truth — when everything is precarious. These are not novels about poverty as spectacle. They are novels about interiority, about the small gestures that hold a community together, and about the kind of grace that arrives without announcement

Hanna Jabali Haddadin *is a writer working at the intersection of faith, poverty, and human dignity. Formed in the Catholic missionary tradition, and deeply familiar with the margins of Asian urban life, Haddadin writes fiction that refuses sentimentality without losing compassion. The Calcutta Trilogy — set in the slums of India — is a sustained literary meditation on grief, community, and the fragile persistence of hope among those the world has forgotten. Writing in English and Italian, Haddadin brings to literary fiction the theological depth of a pastor and the restraint of a careful observer of human suffering.*